



The Great Canadian Naval Mutiny

**By Christopher Wilson,
Senior Consultant, Christopher Wilson & Associates
&
Research Fellow, Centre on Governance, University of Ottawa**

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Today, November the 6th, marks a national day of protest. Oddly though, the protesters are not the masked, black-shirted thugs we witnessed last summer at the G20 Summit in Toronto or student radicals intent on an adrenalin rush but seniors and older adults who are veterans of Canada's armed forces. They are protesting their treatment at the hands of bureaucrats and politicians, for what they perceive as a breaking of the fundamental moral contract between the Government of Canada and its service men and women. That contract stipulates that these men and women be willing to risk anything and pay even the ultimate sacrifice in return for a guarantee by the Government that it will look after them and their families.

Recent events and stories raised by outgoing Veterans' Ombudsman Pat Stogran and retired Canadian Forces intelligence officer Sean Bruyey suggest that the Government's commitment to its service men and women remains somewhat flexible, contingent upon both the priorities of the day and an availability of funds. Consequently, making good on the bargain with veterans is left somewhat at the discretion of the bureaucracy to determine. This has never been good policy as Bruyey, a speaker at today's demonstration on Parliament Hill, pointed out from experience. "Parliament turned a blind eye, allowing bureaucrats to get us into this mess" (Tam, 2010).

In one of his last public statements as Veterans' Ombudsman, Pat Stogran complained to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs that the federal bureaucracy has "an insurance-company culture of denial" towards its veterans "who have served this country so well" (Tibbetts, 2010). In addition, Stogran complained about the Veterans Appeal Review Board being "too legalistic"; lacking in transparency; and of operating from a default position of suspicion about veterans' claims. Any doubts, Stogran said, should be resolved in favour of claimants. Stogran also complained about being "duped" by bureaucrats (O'Neill, 2010) when he was told by them that veterans' personal files would be kept confidential. He confessed later that he should have gone to the Minister directly when it became obvious that those files, even his own, were being abused by officials.

This storyline is, sadly, not new. It's a part of the well-worn tale of the relationship between citizens and their political representatives that is mediated by bureaucrats. For the most part the relationship between citizens and politicians is fairly straightforward, given the desire of politicians to remain in power. Politicians are continually adjusting, to the chagrin of many, to the changing and often schizophrenic demands of the populace. So it was that when Bruyey's case became such a public embarrassment, Minister Blackburn made both a public apology and a quick out of court settlement.

But the bureaucracy, on the other hand, has no such urge -- hence Stogran's portrayal of it as having an "insurance-company culture". It operates simply on the basis of rules and not necessarily in the spirit in which those rules were engendered. It is also a culture that can foster the Kafkaesque-like behaviour that treated Bruyey, a decorated retired officer, as if he were an enemy of the state. "To be accused of being an enemy, that shocked me," said Bruyey, who continues to push for reforms at Veterans Affairs. "There are bigger issues here such as freedom of expression that Canadians should be concerned about" (Pugliese, 2010).

Another characteristic of this bureaucratic mindset is its immense learning disability. It has a huge capacity to forget, unlearn, ignore, obfuscate and re-write history. And so it is that as current reports of government bone-headedness and sometimes outright obstructionism have appeared in the media, I could not help but recall the stories my father told of similar mistreatment at the hands of "les corporalistes", the little corporals. It was for him a period of immense betrayal because of his involvement, post World War II, in what is sometimes whispered as the Great Canadian Naval Mutiny. Never heard of it? Neither had I until shortly before my father's passing last year. Only the most ardent of Canadian military historians ever have. And while on the one hand it has been expunged from institutional memory as a shameful illustration of how technocrats lost control, it can also be rightly claimed as a series of landmark demonstrations of citizen empowerment.

My father's story begins with his enlistment in 1944 at the young age of 16 (an illegal age even at that time) when he joined Canada's fledgling naval air arm as part of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve. This was the naval part of Canada's citizen armed forces (as opposed to professional forces) that were mobilized for the war effort. Then for much of the next two years, he served on naval air stations across Britain.

After the war ended in August 1945, Canada's Minister of Defence assured Canadians and wartime service personnel that the volunteers would be repatriated by February 1946. But progress bringing the troops home was slow and occasionally the level of frustration among volunteer troops spilled over into collective insubordination. That frustration was fuelled not only by the delays home but by poor food and accommodation, bad routines, and by bad leadership. At the RCAF's 126 Transport Wing stationed at Uetersen Germany, for instance, aircrews became particularly annoyed that they were required to fly civilian passengers for British Airways when they themselves weren't allowed to go home (Heide, 2008).

The Navy, too, had its own post-war discontent. The Minister of Naval Services Douglas Abbott received numerous direct petitions from Canadian sailors asking for his intervention in one way or another. In one such telegram, one hundred naval firefighters pleaded with the Minister for his help, saying they were “being kept in [their] unit against their will [by their officers]...We turn to you in desperation”(NSS, 1946).

So while awaiting his discharge and a ship home at the Pintail naval air station near Belfast in Northern Ireland, my father was approached by Canadian naval recruiters. The recruiters had come seeking to replenish the ranks of navy airmen which had been drastically reduced. Within a year of VE-day the number of Canadian naval personnel, for instance, dropped dramatically from a wartime high of 100,000 to just under 4,000. The Second World War had seen the Royal Canadian Navy balloon to become the world’s third largest after only the US and the UK. But to continue manning just part of this fleet, Canada had to institute an ambitious post-war naval enlistment goal of 10,000 personnel and the volunteer naval reservists, like my father, were the recruiters’ prime targets.

To encourage re-enlistment, the recruiters promised promotions and better pay, new uniforms and kits, better rations, and better working conditions. After two years in the navy and the most exciting period of his life, my father like many others agreed to re-enlist. Besides, he felt it would be a faster way back to Canada after the many broken promises he had heard about.



Figure 1: HMCS Warrior

Sure enough, within a month he was standing on the fantail of the *Warrior*, Canada’s first light aircraft carrier, as it arrived in Halifax in March of 1946. He and many of his mates then found themselves stationed at RCNAS Dartmouth with 825 Squadron. To his surprise, however,

none of the promises made to him and his shipmates in Europe by the government recruiters ever materialized. In fact, not only did they not receive their promised promotions and pay, but some like my father had had their existing gear and uniforms forever lost on the return voyage to Canada. After four months of living out the same clothes day-in and day-out, my father and others like him grew impatient with the freshly minted Canadian officers that greeted them and who seemed so indifferent to their complaints.

Late in June 1946 dissension in the ranks became so heated that the decision was made to protest to the Commanding Officer at Dartmouth. Their demand was simple enough -- if the government didn’t follow through on its re-enlistment bargain then the men would consider the agreement void and go home. Whether it was due to the luck of the draw or his youthfulness, my father never said, but it was he who became the messenger for the non-commissioned sailors. Upon receipt the men’s collective complaint, the CO promptly locked my father in the brig at Stadacona along with some 100+ other ‘co-conspirators’ and charged them with mutiny.

I should say that at the time the definition of mutiny in the Canadian Navy was pretty vague. Although there has never been anything in Canadian naval history like the images of violent takeover that come to mind from *Mutiny on the Bounty*, mutiny could be narrowly construed as anything done by more than one individual that challenged the authority of a superior officer. As such, mutiny happened quite frequently in the RCN.

On the other hand, mass disobedience in the Navy had been a tolerated shipboard practice since the mid-1930s and it was generally regarded as a means of venting low-level grievances by the ranks. Says Richard Gimblett, “mess deck lock-ins were a variation on the civilian sit-down strike, spontaneous displays precipitated by some local event, and undertaken to alert officers to a problem the sailors believed was within the power of those superiors to correct. Because there did not exist any officially sanctioned outlet for collective complaints, [ship board] officers accepted the lock-in as an unofficial protest” (Gimblett, 2007). In dozens of recorded incidents, from 1936 to 1947, captains of Canadian warships became all too familiar with the fateful phrase, “The men won’t come out, sir!” (Gimblett, 2000) – although never on the high seas and especially never in combat¹.

Unfortunately for my father and the others, the CO of Dartmouth chose to follow the more narrow view of mutiny.

As it turns out the CO’s view stood in contravention of direct orders from Naval Service HQ in Ottawa, which had notified all naval commanders to set up grievance committees and deal with all reasonable complaints that the seamen might have. The naval airmen at Dartmouth, however, were not privy to this information. Therefore, they did what any reasonable person would do in such a situation. They gave the CO and the system he represented a mono-digital salute and left. The unfairness of the CO was so apparent that the members of the shore patrol that watched over the ‘mutineers’ in the brig simply opened the doors one evening in mid July and told them to go home. Which they did, my father included, without a backward glance. So it was that his service to his country ended not with a parade and a thank you but with the acid taste of betrayal from those he had served and a quick exit in the middle of the night. Or so he thought it had ended.

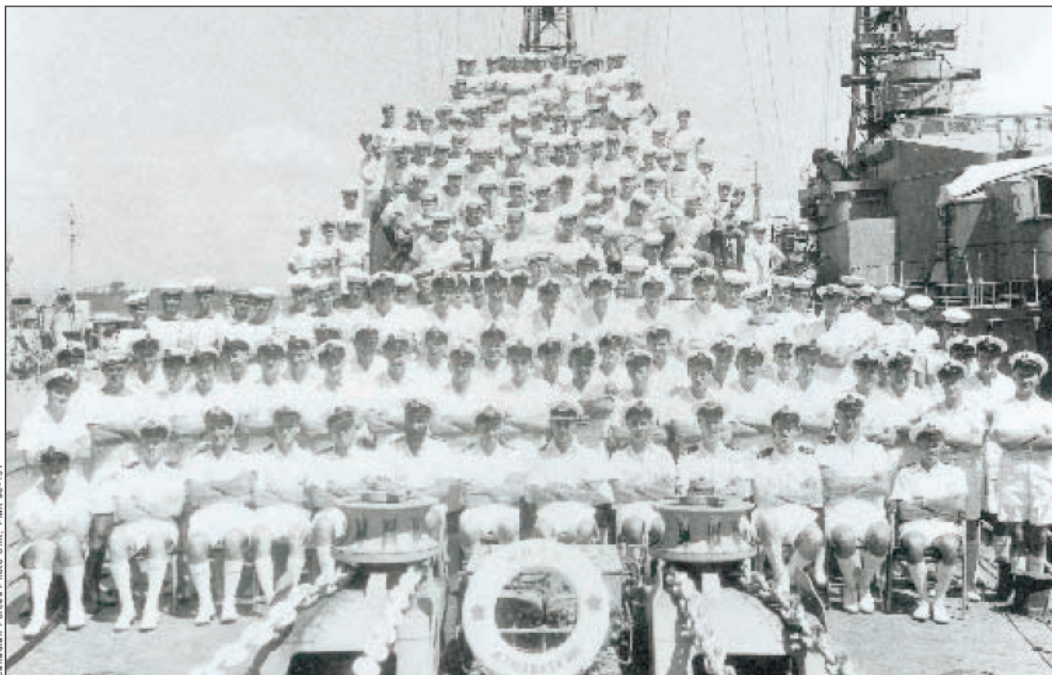
¹ The one possible exception to this might be the ‘incident’ involving HMCS Uganda which in 1945 left war operations in the Pacific Theatre because the crew decided to return to Esquimalt. As unflattering as this decision might seem, it was precipitated only after significant bungling by Mackenzie King’s Government. The Government had announced a limited commitment to the war in the Pacific and that only volunteers would be allowed to fight there. After distinguishing themselves on duty off Okinawa, the crew of the Uganda was asked to vote on whether they wished to re-volunteer and continue operating in the Pacific. While living conditions onboard were quite inhospitable and no wanted to endure further Kamikaze attacks, the clincher was a demeaning speech by the captain, Rollo Mainguy (later Rear-Admiral Mainguy in charge of Canada’s Atlantic Fleet), who apparently called those torn between family and duty “foreflushers and quitters”. The combination of a half-hearted commitment from the Government together with the taunts from Mainguy persuaded two-thirds of the crew that it was time to go home. The crew’s pragmatic view was later summarized as, ‘Well, if we’re not wanted, of course, we don’t want to fight the Japs if it’s not necessary.’ (Butler, 2010)

My father left Nova Scotia and made his way to Kitchener where he found a job in a restaurant as a cook's assistant and went back to school to finish his high school diploma. Things seemed to be looking up for my father until about 18 months later when the RCMP came knocking on the door of the restaurant looking for him. Since his departure from the RCN had not been sanctioned, to say the least, he was absent without leave and a warrant had been issued for his arrest and return to Stadacona.

My father and many of the men with whom he had ignobly left the Navy were returned to the stockade in Stadacona while the Navy now considered prosecuting them as deserters as well as mutineers.

Unbeknownst to my father and the others who shared his fate in the fall of 1947, the Canadian Navy had just experienced a rash of similar incidents the previous summer, chief among them involving the crown jewel of the Canadian Navy, the cruiser *Ontario*. There over 300 junior ratings, the ship's entire lower deck complement, went into lock down refusing to man their posts. The action did not last long because of the good sense of the captain but the result was a commission of inquiry, headed by the Chief of the Naval Staff Vice-Admiral Harold Grant, which submitted its report to Minister Brooke Claxton in October 1947. In it Grant outlined a series of institutional reforms directed at relieving the grievances of the overworked, underpaid and unrecognized seamen. Essentially Grant recommended, as Grimblett (2000) summarizes, that "if the men's demands were at all reasonable (and invariably they were), they were to be acted upon, promptly and without recrimination."

Unfortunately, Grant's recommendations were not taken seriously and within two years the RCN was further scandalized by an apparent outbreak of mass insubordination over the course of three weeks in the winter of 1949. The first involved the destroyer



Ship's Company of HMCS Athabaskan, one month after the incident of 28 February 1949.

Athabaskan during a fuelling stop at Manzanillo, Mexico. Then two weeks later, on another destroyer, the *Crescent*, eighty-three junior ratings staged a similar protest while in port at Nanjing, China. Then days later, onboard the carrier *Magnificent* (the sister ship of the one that brought my father home) aircraft handlers briefly refused to go to work as ordered, while preparing for fleet manoeuvres in the Caribbean. Terrified that these three ‘mutinies’ might represent a coordinated communist threat to the Navy, the Government struck another commission of inquiry, turning this time to the former captain of the *Uganda*, now Rear-Admiral and Flag Officer of the Canadian Atlantic Fleet, Rollo Mainguy to head it.

Back to 1947 however, Grant’s earlier recommendations proved to be a gift from heaven for my father. While awaiting court martial, a scrappy Ottawa lawyer and former Navy Lt. Commander, Louis C. Audette, came to see him and his co-defendants. Audette tried to persuade the Navy of its folly in bringing charges against seamen for something the Chief of the Navy had just come out and said they should be allowed to do. Despite this, the Navy stubbornly resisted dropping charges against the men. Audette then threatened to put Naval officers and Ottawa bureaucrats on trial in the court of public opinion for failing in their duty to protect the welfare of the very men who had just risked everything by volunteering to serve their country during the war. Still the Navy resisted. Finally, Audette threatened to make any trial as public as possible and to bring to light all the ‘incidents’ of mass disobedience that the Navy preferred to keep secret.

In the end, it was the Navy that blinked and all charges against my father and his shipmates were dropped. My father still had to finish his re-enlistment term which he did in a most lacklustre manner, as one might imagine. But the incident at RCNAS Dartmouth literally disappeared. All records of it were destroyed and the men involved were sworn to secrecy as a condition of charges being dropped and their records being cleansed. All records, of course, save the burden of betrayal by the Navy and the Government that my father carried with him for the remainder of his days.

Later, Audette would become part of the three-member panel that investigated the “incidents of 1949” and was a co-author of the so called “The Mainguy Report” which re-iterated many of the recommendations Grant had made earlier (Mainguy, et al., 1949). It was also Audette who in 1985 submitted the sole remaining copy of the transcripts from “The Mainguy Report” to the National Archives (all others having been destroyed by the Navy). Reflecting on what some have called the darkest period in the Canadian Navy Audette said, “anywhere else but the Armed Forces and it would have been called a sit-down strike, like Jean Claude Parrot and the postal workers. There is little doubt the navy officers at the time thought the world was lucky to have them and they expected the men to reflect this attitude. The navy was widely secretive about what they called the ‘incidents’... [but] I don’t think the officers were wicked. I think they were just fools” (*Citizen Editor*, 1985).

Today we know little of that period. We know that many Canadians were called to serve and many lost their lives in doing so. Yet how quickly it was that that service was forgotten! Most of the people that served in World War II were citizen soldiers, sailors and airmen. During the war they brought with them a sense of egalitarianism and fairness

that quickly overcame the very class-based culture that had traditionally so permeated Canada's professional forces and government bureaucracy. Importantly, they seemed to be very conscious of the bargain they struck with Canada and they demonstrated no reticence in holding Canada to account.

Reflecting on the many incidents of mass disobedience that occurred in Canada's armed forces after the war, Heide notes that the incidents were "driven by the need to restore just practices...and defend the group's moral economy. [The] men shared common experiences, and through these experiences they had come to develop a sense of what rights should be accorded them for their service. These rights – and their superiors' obligations – included ensuring good welfare and good leadership for the personnel under their care."

In today's context, the 'duty of care' lessons from Canada's post-WWII naval 'mutinies' remain extremely relevant. When citizens give up their civilian rights and risk everything in service to their country, the country, the Government and public servants have a higher duty of care to them than to those who have been protected by that service. That is our collective moral contract with veterans. When that contract appeared broken, as it did many times between 1945 and 1949; when those in authority failed to honour their obligations; then Canadian servicemen stood and said 'no'. In doing so they were not mutineers, as the institutions might like to claim, but responsible citizens holding government to account.

Today when that 'duty of care' is again being ignored and obfuscated, and the moral contract with recent veterans reneged upon, it is comforting to know that today's veterans will still stand up and say 'no'. The question in my mind though, is why they still have to?

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