

## Canadian Military History

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Volume 19 | Issue 1

Article 9

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3-27-2015

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### Recommended Citation

Roger Sarty (2010) "Admiral Kingsmill and the Early Years of the Royal Canadian Navy," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol19/iss1/9>

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# Admiral Kingsmill and the Early Years of the Royal Canadian Navy

Roger Sarty

*Following is a background paper and the first of a series of historical documents assembled to support the creation of a Ontario provincial plaque in honour of Admiral Kingsmill by the Ontario Heritage Trust. Further documents with commentaries will be published in forthcoming issues to help mark the Navy's centennial. Warm thanks to Beth Anne Mendes, Coordinator, Plaque Programs, Ontario Heritage Trust, who managed the project and assisted with the writing and editing, and to Dr. Robert Davison, Wilfrid Laurier University, who assisted with the research.*

## Introduction

Charles Edmund Kingsmill was the founder of the Canadian navy. He was the principal technical advisor to the Canadian government in the creation of the navy in 1908-10, and became the professional head of the new service for its first ten years, 1910-1920. The government selected Kingsmill because of his naval expertise. He repeatedly called upon this expertise during the challenging period of political controversy and limited resources that attended the navy's birth and threatened to destroy the young service.<sup>1</sup>

Kingsmill's expertise came from nearly 40 years of service as an officer in Britain's Royal Navy, the world's strongest and arguably most effective fighting sea service at the time. He served on most types of warships in most parts of the world. Although Kingsmill, at just 14 years of age, left his native Ontario to join the Royal Navy as a midshipman, his allegiance and outlook was Canadian. He showed a deep understanding of the distinction between British Empire and Canadian interests in maritime armed forces at a time when that distinction was anything but clear. Kingsmill, with his firm grasp of the practical needs

of maritime sovereignty and security, and understanding of the Canadian political and social situation, did much to clarify that distinction, and acted effectively to advance Canadian interests.

## Background

Kingsmill was the grandson of William Kingsmill, an officer in the British regular army who had served in the Peninsular campaign against Napoleon. In 1833, while on service in the British garrison in Upper Canada, William retired from the army to settle in the new country. He held a number of civil government posts and was ultimately postmaster at Guelph, Ontario. In 1837-38 he came out of active militia service to organize units to counter the rebellion led by William Lyon Mackenzie and guard the Niagara frontier against intervention by American sympathizers. William Kingsmill's seventh child was John Juchereau Kingsmill (1829-1900), who became a prominent lawyer in Guelph. He was Crown Attorney from 1856-1866, and in 1867 was appointed judge of Bruce County. John Juchereau's first child, Charles Edmund, was born in Guelph on 7 July 1855.

Young Charles attended Upper Canada College in Toronto, as his father and uncles had before him. In September 1869, he travelled to England to train as an officer cadet in the Royal Navy, as a nominee of the then governor-general of Canada, Lord Lisgar. At that time it was not uncommon for Canadians wishing to become professional (ie. full-time) members of the armed forces, to join the British services. Canadians – considered British citizens who lived overseas – had the right to join the British armed services on much the same basis as residents of the British Isles.

## Establishment of the Canadian Navy

By about the mid-19th century Britain determined that its self-governing colonies should become more responsible for their own defence. This was one of the main reasons why the government in London promoted confederation of the British North American colonies into the new "dominion" of Canada in 1867. The issue, however, was land forces, not naval forces. Canada began to establish its first small units of regular troops in 1871, the year in which the last of British army

garrisons on station in central Canada withdrew.

There was no question of Canada raising its own naval forces.<sup>2</sup> In the negotiations on defence at the time of Confederation, Britain promised continued naval protection. The Royal Navy retained its dockyards at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Esquimalt, British Columbia, to support warships of the North America and West Indies station and the Pacific station that operated regularly in Canadian waters.

By the early 20th century Britain looked to its self-governing colonies for naval assistance to meet increased international rivalry. Because of that rivalry the Royal Navy concentrated its fleet in European waters, closed the dockyards at Halifax and Esquimalt, and removed the warships permanently stationed in the western Atlantic and eastern Pacific at the end of 1904. Canada's prime minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, faced sharp disagreement between English-speaking Canadians who advocated defence cooperation with Britain, and French-speaking Canadians who believed that any form of naval initiative would be ultimately controlled by the British Admiralty which would draw the country into every British conflict overseas. Laurier's compromise was to develop the government's civil marine fleet, and particularly the Fisheries Protection Service, into a national navy for the defence of the oceans adjacent to the country's coasts. The dockyards at Halifax and Esquimalt, which Canada's department of Marine and Fisheries took over, were a valuable resource. Still, the government needed an experienced senior officer to lead the effort, specifically someone who was sensitive to Canadian demographics,



**Admiral Sir Charles Edmund Kingsmill**

politics and requirements. Laurier selected Kingsmill, whose success in the Royal Navy was well known, and whose family was active in public life and sympathetic to the Liberal party.

In 1908 Kingsmill retired with the rank of rear-admiral from the

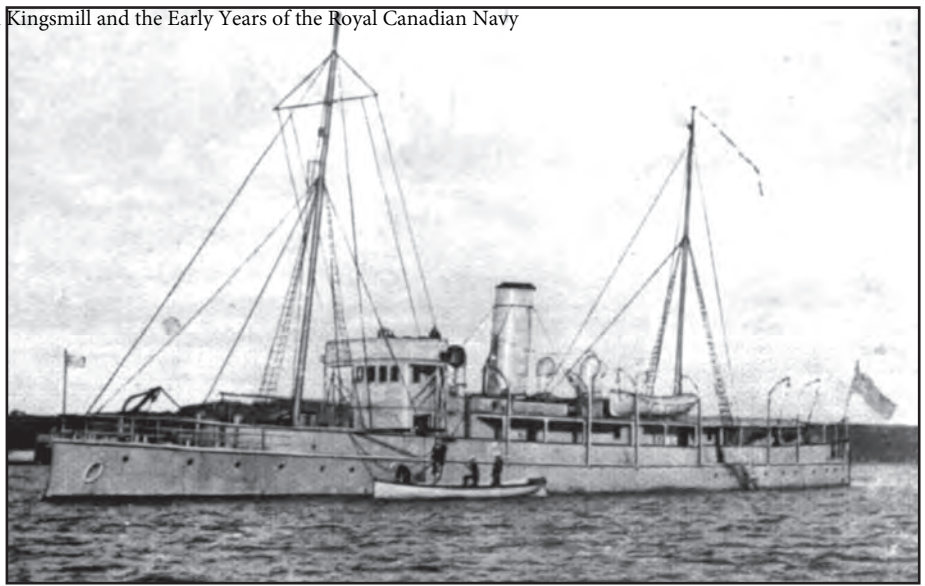
Royal Navy to take command of the Canadian government's civil fleet and improve the very basic program of naval training already started in the largest of the armed fisheries protection steamers, Canadian Government Ship *Canada*. In 1909, Britain was very concerned about German naval expansion. This threat prompted English-speaking Canadians to demand that Canada must do more, and Kingsmill produced a plan for a modest Canadian naval service. Advice from Britain resulted in the Laurier government quickly establishing the new Canadian Navy<sup>3</sup> in 1910, with plans for a larger fleet than Kingsmill's scheme, but it was a logical development of his plan. The Naval Service Bill was introduced into the House of Commons in January 1910. It received Royal Assent on 4 May 1910 and created a department of the naval service under the minister of Marine and Fisheries.

A director of the naval service was provided for in the naval act, to be the professional head of the service, preferably with a rank not lower than that of rear-admiral. Charles Edmund Kingsmill became the first director of the naval service and would serve until his retirement in 1920. Kingsmill firmly grasped the possibilities for a Canadian navy that, although built on British models, would be shaped by Canada's particular maritime interests, such as the close protection of the coastline and ports, the gathering of marine intelligence for the government in Ottawa, and the enforcement of fisheries regulations. He understood how those interests differed from Britain's larger international concerns, such as the defence of shipping around the world that supplied the British economy, a global mission that

precluded attention to more local Canadian needs.

Almost immediately in 1910 intense division between English and French speaking opinion in Canada slowed down the development of the new navy. In 1911 when Robert Borden's Conservatives came into power they stopped all naval development, slashing the budget and ending recruitment of personnel. Kingsmill was bitterly discouraged, but remained a loyal and devoted public servant. He never spoke out in public and scrupulously respected the British principle of the supremacy of the civil authority over the military, a principle that was strongly embedded in Canadian practice.<sup>4</sup> Kingsmill used his energies to press forward with war planning and such training as was possible with the resources he had available. He gave particular priority to the training of young Canadian officer cadets, as they were the hope for the future of the service. The Royal Naval College of Canada, established at Halifax early in 1911, remained open to receive new classes each year despite the severe budget cuts. The plan was that the cadets, after the two years of work ashore at the College, would then receive sea training in two cruisers, HMCS *Niobe* on the Atlantic coast, and HMCS *Rainbow* on the Pacific, whose purchase from the Royal Navy Kingsmill had arranged in 1910. These ships could not get to sea however, as the budget cuts left too few personnel to crew them. Kingsmill therefore obtained places for the cadets on British warships.

Although the Canadian navy had shrunk to only 350 personnel, when war broke out in August 1914 the service was able to implement basic coast defence measures thanks to the planning and preparations Kingsmill had organized. Britain provided large warships for offshore defence. With assistance from British and Newfoundland personnel and Canadian volunteers, the two



**Top: Canadian Government Ship *Canada* as she appeared when completed by her British builders, Vickers Sons and Maxim, in 1904.**

**Above: HMS *Niobe* arriving at Halifax, NS, 21 October 1910 to being service as the first of "His Majesty's Canadian Ships."**

Canadian cruisers were able to get to sea to join the British forces in protecting shipping in North American waters. Eventually the Naval Service recruited over 9,600 officers and ratings during the course of the War.

In 1915 Germany began to use submarines to attack British shipping. The large British and Canadian warships were vulnerable to submarine attack, but the Royal Navy had no anti-submarine warships to spare. Kingsmill never relented in his pressure on the Royal Navy to more effectively assist in Canadian waters, but as it became clear the British were unable to adequately counter

the German submarines hunting in British waters, he led efforts to use any and all Canadian resources. The navy took up government and civilian ships that had the speed and sea keeping qualities needed for anti-submarine duties, armed these vessels, and hurriedly trained Canadian volunteers to crew them. In 1917-1918 the Canadian navy department worked with the British Admiralty to build a 160 small anti-submarine vessels in Canada, and Kingsmill persuaded the Admiralty to allocate many of these to expand the Canadian force. In these efforts, Kingsmill took care not to disturb the training of the young Canadian officer



HMCS Rainbow at Esquimalt, BC.

cadets, leaving them to continue to serve in major British warships in more active theatres. He used his connections to find experienced Royal Navy officers, many of them retired, to organize and command the new small-ship anti-submarine flotilla.

Throughout the war, Kingsmill resisted Royal Navy efforts to control operations at Canadian ports, which were vital for the shipment of troops and war material to the United Kingdom. Using the experienced former Royal Navy officers he had invited into Canadian service, he strengthened the navy's coastal commands and intelligence gathering organization to better assert Canada's authority, and work on a more equal basis with Britain. The Canadian navy was thus able to take an effective part in cooperation with the American and British navies, in the defence of shipping in the western Atlantic when large German submarines crossed the ocean in the summer and fall of 1918. This experience convinced even Conservative Prime Minister Robert Borden (1911-1920) that the country required the navy the Laurier government had established with Kingsmill's advice.

### Kingsmill's Legacy

At the time of Kingsmill's retirement in 1920, the small staff of experienced ex-Royal Navy officers he had assembled in Ottawa was developing detailed plans for the navy's future on the basis of the experience of 1914-18. Government cuts to military spending in the 1920s made these plans largely theoretical, but they became the basis for rebuilding the navy in the late 1930s and the foundation for the massive expansion of the service in the Second World War. That growth, and the significant Canadian naval contribution to the western alliance in the early Cold War would be led by Canadian naval officers to whose recruitment and training Kingsmill had devoted such attention.

During the course of his expansive career Kingsmill was well-recognized for his impressive service and contributions. He was made an Officer of the French Legion of Honour and a Grand Officer of the Crown of Italy. In 1913, he was promoted on the British Royal Navy's retired list to vice-admiral, then to full admiral in 1917. He was knighted by King George V in 1918.

He died in 1935 at his summer home on Grindstone Island, near Portland, Ontario and is buried in Emmanuel Anglican Cemetery, Portland.

### Notes

1. For further reading: Gilbert Norman Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada; Its Official History: Vol.I. Origins and Early Years* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1952). Contains much information still not readily available in any other published source; Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders 1880-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991). Incorporates military and political history scholarship published since Tucker's volume appeared, and archival material from Canadian, British, U.S. and German archives to which his team did not have access; Richard H. Gimblett, "Admiral Sir Charles E. Kingsmill: Forgotten Father," in Michael Whitby, Richard H. Gimblett and Peter Haydon, eds., *The Admirals: Canada's Senior Naval Leadership in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006), 31-53. The fullest biographical account of Kingsmill; Roger Sarty, *The Maritime Defence of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996). Contains essays on the origins of the navy, the navy and development of Canadian sovereignty, and the defence of the Pacific coast in the era of the First World War that shed light on Kingsmill's role.
2. In 1881, there was an early attempt to establish a Canadian navy, when the young country acquired a steam-powered wooden vessel, HMS *Charybdis* from the Royal Navy as a training ship. The vessel, however, proved to need such expensive repairs that the Canadian government returned her to the British.
3. The service became the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) in 1911 when King George V granted permission to add the pre-fix "Royal."
4. Kingsmill was a prolific correspondent on professional matters in letters and memoranda that survive in the records of the navy, and the papers of such public figures as Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Sir Robert Borden, and Louis-Philippe Brodeur, held at Library and Archives Canada and other Ottawa area archives. He was not shy about expressing his views, but did so only to other officials and his political masters. An accurate summation of Kingsmill's place in published historical literature is the sub-title of Richard Gimblett's biographical article: 'Forgotten Father' of the navy.

## Document

# Kingsmill's plan for the Canadian Navy, 1909

Officer Commanding Marine Service of Canada to Minister of Marine and Fisheries, 19 April 1909, extracts (Library and Archives Canada, Record Group 24, Volume 3830, file NS 1017-1-1)

*Editor's note: The file copy of the proposal for Canadian naval development that Kingsmill drafted in response to the House of Commons resolution of 29 March 1909 that called for the "speedy" creation of a naval service. To note is the priority Kingsmill gives to fisheries protection, long the issue of maritime security that had most concerned the Canadian government, and the need to build the navy on the foundation of the government's existing marine resources. These had long been the essential elements in the Laurier government's policy that Kingsmill had been hired to develop. Also significant is the priority Kingsmill gives to the acquisition of "two small cruisers" from Britain to serve as training vessels and to strengthen fisheries protection. At this time the Admiralty's advice, given to Australia in 1908, was that the dominions should limit themselves to the smallest classes of warships, torpedo boats and destroyers, purely for coastal defence. The "small cruisers" of the Sirius class Kingsmill recommends were, at 3400 tons displacement, more than three times as big as the largest destroyers, and unlike the destroyers had full ocean-going capabilities, together with excellent accommodation for training that the destroyers lacked. This recommendation was the genesis of the policy carried out by the Canadian government in 1910 with the purchase of the British cruisers Rainbow, which was of the Sirius type, for the west coast, and the much larger Niobe for the east coast. Those cruisers embodied the idea, planted by Kingsmill, that the Canadian navy must, in order to exercise effective control over the country's ocean frontiers, have an ocean-going capacity.*

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Officer Commanding  
Marine Service of Canada  
Ottawa, April 19, 1909

Sir,

It is with a strong feeling of diffidence that I submit, singlehanded, a scheme of Naval Defence for Canada, and wish to say that my views are given after due consideration of the fact that monetary contribution alone is out of the question, and that we must develop our Naval assistance to the Empire with this end always in view, that the Canadian Navy is to be under the control of the Dominion Government, the question of its disposition in the even of War being a matter for those in authority at the time; also that at an early date we must use the newly started Naval Service for the Protection of our Fisheries, in fact, that Fisheries Protection and Training go hand in hand, thus using the appropriation for the former in carrying out the latter which, of course, will be a considerable

assistance and in the end a better use will have been made of the money.

Understanding that the above is the plan on which you wish me to work, I submit the following:

A. The first, and one of the principal things Canada should do for the defence of the Empire and for her own benefit, is the provision of proper Dock accommodation and the proper defence of her already fortified Ports. The necessity for this is so apparent that I do not enter in explanation.

1. Halifax and Esquimalt [ink insertion: "or a properly fortified Port on Pacific Coast"] should have their Dry Docks brought up to date and their Machine Shops kept in working order either by Government or by subsidizing private Concerns. A dock should be built at Quebec and at Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and the latter fortified and made a Naval Base. I will call these our Naval Bases.
2. The proper defence of these Naval Bases should be undertaken; I am not

referring to the forts, now, but to the narrowing of the Navigable Channel by sinking obstructions in time of War, or by properly organized boom defence.

3. The Establishment of Examination Service: this would come under the Military Authorities, but the Vessels used would belong to Naval Department. (I may point out here that this one matter shows how desirable it is that we should have Interdepartmental Committees.)
  4. The proper organization of our Coastal Signal Service and the connecting up by wire of all important observing Stations. This is a very important matter – in Great Britain it is undertaken by the Coast Guard and the Government Telegraph Department, (with headquarters at the General Post Office).
  5. A well organized Signal Service is of the greatest assistance and positively necessary in the even of War, for many thousands of money could be wasted by false reports and much distress caused without burning any power. A Hostile Cruiser would have to be carefully watched, and our scouts reporting her whereabouts by wireless would need good assistance from shore stations in directing the proper disposition of the Defence.
- B. Turning now to Naval Training in conjunction with Fisheries Protection, and considering British Columbia first:
1. We have there a very important Industry, and at present an imperfect Protection. I would submit that we should, if possible, obtain from Great Britain two small cruisers, fairly up to date, capable of training say 200 men, these ships to be bought in, becoming in every way our property, sailing under our Flag, but to be officered and partly manned by Royal Navy, the officers and portion of complement being chosen for their capabilities as Instructors; these officers and men coming entirely under the Dominion Government and under control of the officer chosen by the Government as their Executive. The training of Stokers and Seamen could go on, and the promising Seamen sent to England for a course in Gunnery,

Torpedo and Signal School, and those who were not doing well promptly dismissed.

At Esquimalt we should establish and up to date Signal School open to all Merchant Seamen, particular attention should be given to Telegraphy, Wireless and other – this, so that in the event of trouble in the East we could have a good staff for use in our Mercantile Cruisers, and be training a staff for our Signal Stations.

2. At present, British Ships of War visit the Seal fishing Grounds – this duty could be undertaken by our ships after the fact is recognized by Foreign Governments that Canada has a Navy, as also could the Police visits of British Ships to British Pacific Ports, be, in time, relegated to us. Training for our people and an assistance to the Imperial Government.

3. The Officer Commanding, or Director, or whatever designation he will be known by, should have, at Esquimalt, an experienced Officer in General Charge; for some time this officers should be an Officer of the Royal Navy with under him, as Understudy, an Officer, Canadian if possible, but if not one with Seafaring knowledge and the necessary education, who has thrown in his lot with us. A Staff also would be necessary to keep proper returns, for all Naval warlike stores, etc., should be under the Officer Commanding for the Dominion Government, and I cannot too strongly advocate the system in vogue in the Navy where red tape is almost eliminated and fraud easily recognized.

Note: I would submit here that the Officer Commanding for Dominion Government by styled DIRECTOR NAVAL SERVICE [“Service” stroked out and ink amended to “Forces”] and generally addressed D.N.S.

4. In Great Britain training and education of Seaman, who are destined to fill positions of responsibility, commences at a very early age. With us, at the start, it

would be necessary that all Candidates should pass an examination, the standard of which should be fixed by the Civil Service Commission, and this Examination should be entirely open to all, Medical fitness and British origin or Canadian Nationality being a sine qua non.

C. To now turn to the Atlantic Coast:

1. [Original text: “I would advise that here we should commence in the same way, but that out training should be for Torpedo Defence alone, at first.” Ink amended to “I would advise that here we should commence in the same way, but that our training should be for Torpedo Defence alone, from one cruiser “Canada” at first in conjunction with a training school on shore.” Then this whole paragraph struck out.]

[Original text: “We should procure, to start with, two Destroyers of not too old a class, but of the best Sea keeping qualities.” Ink amended to “We should procure on loan, to start with, one cruiser of Sirius Class and two Torpedo Boat Destroyers.”] With these, and the “CANADA,” officered by Royal Naval Officers and Instructors, we should train the crews of four Destroyers, and at the same time [ink insertion: “partly”] Protect our Fisheries on the Atlantic Seaboard. With [ink insertion: “Sirius”] two Destroyers and the “CANADA,” [Original text “we would have one Destroyer’s Complement to train” ink amended to “fully manned we should have a force of roughly speaking 300 men under training, a proportion of them”] in Barracks on shore, these men relieving those on board from time to time so that all would get a share of the Sea work.

The best of these men, as in case of British Colombia training ships, being sent to England to the Gunnery, Torpedo and Signal Schools.

2. ...

3. Halifax, from the fact of its Dockyard, and being an open Port, should be Principal Naval Headquarters on the

Atlantic Coast, and like Esquimalt, should be in charge of, for Executive purposes, at first a capable Royal Naval Officer, in time relieved by his Understudy, who should be his Assistant from the beginning; the whole establishment being under the D.N.S. who would be responsible to the Government. At Quebec should also be established a Signal Training School and late on, as we progress, a Naval Station.

4. We should at once commence building Destroyers and [original text: “Torpedo boats” struck out and ink amended to “Cruisers”]. What we should build, that is lay down, now as soon as possible, would be: Two ocean going Destroyers, vessels of 700 to 900 tons displacement, for the Atlantic: two Coastal Destroyers, vessels of 270 tons displacement, for the Pacific Coast: Four Torpedo boats; the Torpedo boats could be built, after a model has been obtained, in Canada, to save sending them round Cape Horn to British Columbia.

Australia proposes to build:

3 Ocean going Destroyers, 1st class vessels of 700 to 900 tons;

1 Ocean going Destroyer, 2nd class vessel of 500 to 600 tons;

16 Coastal Destroyers (now call 1st class Torpedo boats), 270 tons displacement

4 1st Class Torpedo Boats.

She has already ordered two ocean going Destroyers, and the material for a third, which is to be built in Australia. We should need, eventually, all that Australia proposes and our Cruisers after that...

Roger Sarty is professor of history at Wilfrid Laurier University and the editor-in-chief of *Canadian Military History*.