

# Tin-Can Canucks

A Century of Canadian Destroyers

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## DEDICATION

To all Canadian destroyer crews, at sea, onshore and in greener pastures.

# 1

## THE EARLY YEARS AFTER THE GREAT WAR

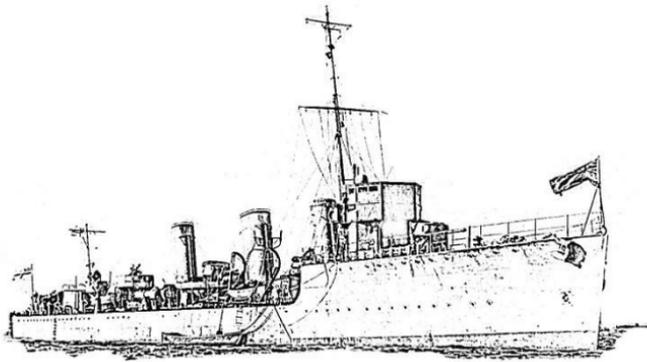
In the years after the end of the Great War, the Royal Canadian Navy faced an existential threat brought about by the three-fold problems of anti-war sentiment, growing governmental financial constraints, and a poor public image—the latter helped neither by the Halifax explosion nor the Army’s high profile “100 days” offensive, both coming at the close of the war.

Here the Navy found itself at first with too many ships and not enough crew—for the Royal Navy had gifted Canada with two destroyers, a light cruiser and a pair of submarines after hostilities ended; at the same time as the RCN was demobilizing. Shortly after however, the Navy faced an even more insoluble problem—too little money to keep even the crew and ships they had.

The Canadian navy was founded when the Naval Service Bill of 1910 received royal assent on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1910, and received its Royal designation from King George V on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1911. Yet it took Canada ten years before a destroyer was given the appellation HMCS. The first—*Patriot* and *Patrician*—were a gift to the Dominion from England after the first world war, and along with the cruiser HMCS *Aurora* replaced the

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elderly HMCS *Rainbow* and HMCS *Niobe*, which had been the bulk of the Canadian fleet to that time. Sadly depression-era budget cuts saw *Aurora* paid off and scrapped, leaving *Patriot* and *Patrician* the only warships in Canadian service until the purchase of HMCS *Vancouver* (ex-HMS *Torbay*) and HMCS *Champlain* (ex-HMS *Toreador*) in 1934. These then replaced the elderly *Patriot* and *Patrician* and would serve as the destroyer force while Canada's first new-built destroyers were constructed in England.



### HMCS *Patriot* (Thornycroft M-class)

Length:	274'	Laid Down:	07-1915
Beam:	27' 6"	Launched:	20-04-1916
Draft:	10' 6"	Commissioned:	01-11-1920
Displacement:	1004 tons	Paid Off:	21-10-1927
Armament:	3 x 4" LA guns, four 21" torpedo tubes, 2 x 2pdr AA guns		

*Patriot*, like her sister *Patrician*, was a WW1 vintage destroyer of the M class. Unlike other M-class destroyers they were not built to Admiralty specification, but instead were “specials” ordered from Thornycroft<sup>1</sup> to the company's own design.

Both destroyers saw service during the Great War—*Patriot*

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<sup>1</sup> It's interesting to note that Thornycroft ship-builders appear rather often in the history of Canadian destroyers—fully 20% of all Canadian ships of that type were built by the firm

having sunk the U-boat U-69 in July 1917 after an observer aloft in the destroyer's kite balloon saw the submarine at some 28 miles. *Patriot* had served with the 14<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla of the Grand Fleet, and by 1920 she and *Patrician* were in need of reconditioning before being gifted to Canada. The cost to make *Patriot* seaworthy was estimated at £6,105 with the work taking an estimated four weeks. More extensive work to bring *Patriot* to full fighting efficiency would take £7,321 and five weeks in dockyard hands. This second option was selected for both destroyers.<sup>2</sup>

The two destroyers would be fitted with an oil-fired galley (to replace the former coal-fired unit and its need for coal), an enclosed bridge to protect those conning the ship from the Canadian weather, and an electric motor launch for harbor use. Steam heat would not be provided as of yet—electrical radiation being used instead<sup>3</sup>. *Patriot* and *Patrician* were commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy—along with the cruiser HMCS *Aurora*—on November 1, 1920 at Devonport.

Surveyed in January 1921—the year after commissioning in the RCN—both destroyers appeared in good shape, although it was obvious that *Patriot's* regular maintenance had been somewhat neglected as she wasn't as well off as her sister. Regardless she was "...in all respects stable and seaworthy."<sup>4</sup>

In August 1921 both *Patriot* and her sister took part in a training exercises designed to test Halifax harbor defenses. *Patriot* was on the opposing force and was directed to attempt to enter the harbor through a "ruse de guerre"—that of pretending to be a member of the defending forces needing urgent repair. While she fooled the port war signal station at Camperdown, she was intercepted by an inspection vessel

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<sup>2</sup> (Schleihauf, Summer 2000)

<sup>3</sup> (Johnston, Rawling, Gimblett, & MacFarlane, 2011) p. 755

<sup>4</sup> (Schleihauf, Summer 2000)

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which alerted the shore batteries—who subsequently “shelled” and “sank” *Patriot* with blanks.

September of 1921 saw *Patriot* used to tow Alexander Graham Bell’s hydrofoil HD-4 on Bras d’or Lakes—a feat later commemorated by the commissioning of the Canadian Force’s experimental hydrofoil HMCS *Bras d’Or* in 1972.

After Bell’s death, *Patriot*’s then Commanding Officer<sup>5</sup> (CO) Lieutenant H.E. Reid remained in contact with F.W. Baldwin who continued Bell’s Hydrofoil work<sup>6</sup>. Baldwin’s subsequent model was designed as a high-speed gunnery target. Even after Lt. Reid’s *Patriot* scored 60 4” gunfire hits, it was still in operational condition. Baldwin’s targets would see heavy use by the Navy during the Second World War, as the RCN’s exponential growth nearly overwhelmed available training resources.

*Patriot* was assigned to the east coast—based out of Halifax—and was the only operation naval vessel on that coast after the budget cuts of 1922. She would spend most of her time training new naval recruits and members of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (the so-called “wavy navy”)

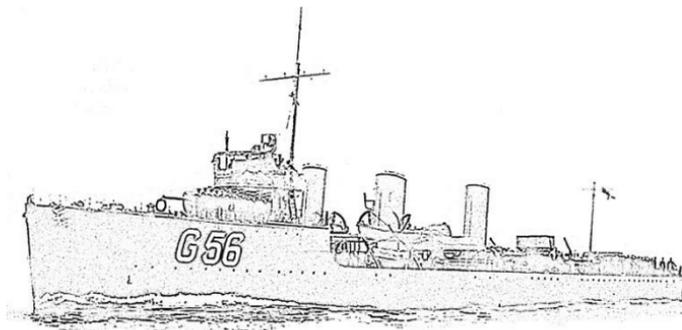
By the late 1920s *Patriot* and *Patrician* were coming to the end of their useful lives and *Patriot* was decommissioned in 1927. She would be sold for £3,110 to Thomas W. Ward Ltd. in 1929 for breaking up.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> To reduce the confusion between the ranks of Captain or Commander and the position of Captain as commander of a vessel I have elected to use the term Commanding Officer or CO rather than the other terms.

<sup>6</sup> (Vice-Admiral H. E. Reid Dead, 1962)

<sup>7</sup> (Schleihauf, Summer 2000)



**HMCS Patrician** (Thornycroft M-class)

Length:	274'	Laid Down:	06-1915
Beam:	27' 6"	Launched:	5-06-1916
Draft:	10' 6"	Commissioned:	01-11-1920
Displacement:	1004 tons	Paid Off:	01-1928
Armament:	3 x 4" LA guns, four 21" torpedo tubes, 2 x 2pdr AA guns		

Like *Patriot*, HMCS *Patrician* had served with the Grand Fleet during the Great War but as a member of the 13<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla rather than the 14<sup>th</sup>. Not as successful a hunter as *Patriot*, she appeared to be in better shape as her refit prior to transfer to the RCN cost only £6,610. An additional £887 per destroyer was required in September of 1920 to fit them with a complete set of awnings and other equipment suitable for their winter training cruises to Bermuda. She and her sister commissioned in Devonport the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1920.

During her 1921 survey she was adjudged in better shape than her sister, and was found to be more economical in fuel consumption—getting 9 miles per ton of fuel while steaming at 11 knots; a mile more per ton than *Patriot*.<sup>8</sup>

After the naval budget cuts of 1922, *Patriot* and *Patrician* were the only sea-going warships in the RCN. *Patrician* was ordered to the west coast in 1922, and like her sister she spent

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<sup>8</sup> (Schleihauf, Summer 2000)

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nearly 5 years training officers and men of the naval reserve.

On 12 December 1924, she was sent to patrol for and intercept a group of bank thieves who had robbed a bank in Canada and were attempting to escape by boat to the United States. The search was ultimately unsuccessful.

In the spring of 1927 *Patrician* took part in a different sort of interdiction mission. The destroyer would take part in patrols on the west coast for halibut poachers—Canadian or American registered vessels which were fishing halibut out of season. In a similar vein the ship sent an armed landing party to search for a seal poacher thought to be operating around Aristazabel Island.<sup>9</sup>

Similar to *Patriot*, *Patrician* was worn out by the end of 1927 and no longer of economical use. She was decommissioned and eventually sold for breaking in 1929. Unlike her sister who was broken up in Wales, *Patrician* would face the scrapper's torch where she had spent her last few years—British Columbia.



### HMCS Vancouver (Thornycroft S-class)

Length:	276'	Laid Down:	11-1917
Beam:	27' 6"	Launched:	07-12-1918
Draft:	10' 6"	Commissioned:	01-03-1928
Displacement:	1087 tons	Paid Off:	25-11-1936
Armament:	3 x 4" LA guns, four 21" torpedo tubes, 1 x 2pdr AA guns		

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<sup>9</sup> (Johnston, Rawling, Gimblett, & MacFarlane, 2011) p. 832

In November of 1927 the Canadian Government announced its intention to order a pair of modern destroyers from England. These ships (*Saguenay* and *Skeena*—see below) would take some time to design and construct, and so the RCN elected to lease a pair of Great War vintage destroyers to cover the time between the decommissioning of *Patriot* and *Patrician* and the commissioning of *Saguenay* and *Skeena*.

HMCS *Vancouver* had served in the Royal Navy as HMS *Toreador*. She was one of the S-Class, a small destroyer designed late in the war. Like *Patriot* and *Patrician* the two S-class destroyers were “Specials”; built to a slightly different design by Thornycroft. They were descendants of the earlier M-Class (like *Patriot* and *Patrician*) and were quite similar in many ways, but were visually distinguished by having two rather than three funnels and a raised platform for the forecastle 4-inch gun.

In Canadian service she was named for explorer George Vancouver (1757-1798)—like her sister *Champlain* she was one of the first ships with names associated with Canada. *Vancouver* was based in Esquimalt and she took over *Patrician*'s training and patrol duties; continuing even after *Saguenay* and *Skeena* were commissioned.

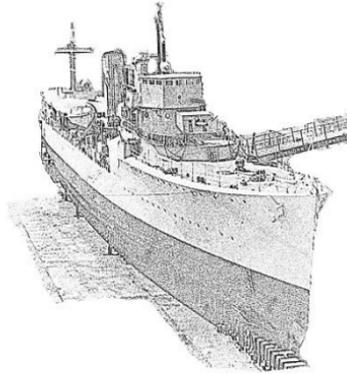
In 1931 Canada was asked by the British Foreign Office to send a naval vessel to El Salvador to show the flag and protect British interests during the post-coup tensions and the La Mantza peasant uprising and ensuing military crackdown. *Vancouver* and *Skeena* were dispatched to two different ports, with *Vancouver* arriving at Port La Union in January 1932. Although she was ordered to land an armed party by the British Charge d'Affairs, no such party was landed—the order being countermanded by Commander (D). By January 25 she had moved to Acajutla a tiny village that was the terminus of the British-owned railway connecting to San Salvador. Both destroyers would depart at the end of the month, while the military junta would maintain control of El Salvador for another 60 years.

By 1935 the two S-class ships were in poor shape; a 1934

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naval engineer survey indicated that of the two destroyers would need a refit costing over \$80,000 each—with another \$50,000 to make them fit for a North Atlantic crossing to return them to England. Ultimately the British—who had no interest in retaining the ships as operational units and feared for the safety of their crews should they be sailed home—agreed that the *Vancouver* and *Champlain* could be scrapped in Canada with their guns and other military supplies turned over to the RCN.<sup>10</sup>

*Vancouver* was decommissioned in November of 1936, and broken up the next year.



### **HMCS Champlain** (Thornycroft S-class)

Length:	276'	Laid Down:	11-1917
Beam:	27' 6"	Launched:	06-03-1919
Draft:	10' 6"	Commissioned:	01-03-1928
Displacement:	1087 tons	Paid Off:	25-11-1936
Armament: 3 x 4" LA guns, four 21" torpedo tubes, 1 x 2pdr AA guns			

HMCS *Champlain* was a Thornycroft S-Class destroyer like HMCS *Vancouver* and like her sister wasn't launched before the Great War ended. Commissioned as HMS *Torbay* and placed in

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<sup>10</sup> (Johnston, Rawling, Gimblett, & MacFarlane, 2011) p. 946

reserve in 1920, this destroyer was selected to join the RCN while *Skeena* and *Saguenay* were being built. Named for Samuel de Champlain (1574-1635) HMCS *Champlain* was commissioned into Canadian service in 1928 and based out of Halifax as the east coast destroyer.

Beginning in 1929 *Champlain* and *Vancouver* began participating in a winter peacetime cruise to the Caribbean Sea. This tradition would continue through to the outbreak of the Second World War and would include other destroyers as the Royal Canadian Navy expanded.

In January 1931, en route to the Caribbean, *Champlain* ran into a gale which required her to reduce speed to the minimum to maintain steerage—according to the revolution counters this was 8 knots, but the ship was moving only about 4 knots through the raging waters. Three days later *Champlain* arrived in St. David's having—like *Grise* twelve years before—lost her rigging and deck fittings and with severe damage to boats and bridge. Luckily there were no casualties.

The following year, while in Trinidad, *Champlain's* Gunner (Torpedo) responded to a disturbance related to the Danish ship MS *Stensby*. Apparently the *Stensby's* chief tally clerk had been distributing food to the locals through an open porthole. The ship's Chief Officer responded by brandishing his revolver and in the ensuing incident two men were injured. Responding to *Stensby's* siren, the party from *Champlain* arrived on the scene and sentries were posted at the gangway with orders to ensure nobody left the *Stensby* until local police arrived to take matters in hand<sup>11</sup>.

In August 1934 *Champlain* took part in the Jacques Cartier Quartercentenary at Gaspe; she was joined by HMCS *Saguenay*, at the time the other east coast destroyer.

It wasn't cheap to run destroyers and in the interwar years the RCN faced many budgetary challenges and upkeep costs

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<sup>11</sup> (Johnston, Rawling, Gimblett, & MacFarlane, 2011) p. 900

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never seemed to go down. *Champlain* on her own had gone from costing almost \$70,000 per year in 1928 to peak at nearly \$220,000 per year in 1931. The newer destroyers would cost almost \$390,000 per year each by the late 1930s just to stay operational<sup>12</sup>.

By that time *Champlain* and her sister was deemed too worn for further service and in no shape for an Atlantic crossing. She would be decommissioned in November 1936 and broken up in 1937. The ship's armament was removed and stored for future use, when war—already on the horizon—broke out.

*Champlain* and *Vancouver* were completed too late for the previous war, and decommissioned and scrapped before the next, but they had had their part to play. The training they had provided would form the nucleus of a larger RCN in World War Two.

To read more about the Canadian Navy's Tin-Can Canucks, pick up the complete volume *Tin-Can Canucks: A Century of Canadian Destroyers* (ISBN: 978-0-9691548-02-2) on sale this fall, or visit:

[www.tincan Canucks.com](http://www.tincan Canucks.com)

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 948

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sean Campbell is a former reservist with the Canadian Forces, with a deep love of Canadian Military History. Hailing from Prince Edward Island, Sean's interest in the RCN was first piqued in 1995 with the commissioning of HMCS *Charlottetown*, but it was the 2010 Canadian Naval Centennial that truly caught his imagination.

He is a competitive scale modeler, having won awards for his work, and has several models of Canadian naval vessels on public display. Some of Sean's prior written work on the history of Canadian destroyers has appeared in *Canadian Naval Review*.

A software engineer turned digital marketing consultant, Sean currently resides in Calgary, Alberta with his daughter and an overweight guinea pig.