



NAVAL TACTICAL OPERATIONS GROUPS

As a globally deployable navy with a vested interest in maintaining safety and security at sea, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) has long played a role in boarding operations. In war, boarding operations might be for the purpose of taking over a ship. In peacetime, authorized personnel – and this may depend on the location, for example, the coast guard in national waters, or a navy with international authorization (e.g., from the United Nations) or their domestic government in international waters – board a vessel for a specific purpose. Countering smuggling, drug trafficking and sanctions violations means taking a closer look at merchant ships transiting or heading to or from certain areas. Boarding parties can be authorized to examine a ship’s cargo in a search for, for example, drugs, weapons, or passengers who are traveling in contravention of international law and/or the ship’s manifest. Boarding teams routinely conduct inspections of ‘vessels of interest,’ where identities are checked and cargo inspected. While this is normally routine, there is always the risk of meeting resistance.

Historically, the RCN’s boarding parties have been made up of regular crew members who include this as a secondary duty. While that part-time system still dominates RCN boarding doctrine, activities in recent years showed the need for a dedicated and better trained force. During *Operation Artemis* – Canada’s participation in counter-terrorism and maritime security operations in the waters around the Middle East – that need became apparent. It was one thing for naval boarding teams to inspect a fishing boat in the Arabian Sea, another to come face-to-face with Somali pirates brandishing AK-47 machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, or a boat transporting drugs with an armed crew which is unwilling to surrender its illegal cargo.¹

This need led to the formation of the Maritime Tactical Operations Groups (MTOGs), now called the Naval Tactical Operations Groups (NTOGs), highly trained specialty boarding teams designed to be used on riskier missions. RCN commander at the time Vice-Admiral Mark Norman authorized the development of the unit in 2014 and the first team of 10 went to sea with HMCS *Winnipeg* in June 2015 to take part in counter-drug operations in the Caribbean and then with the Canadian contribution to NATO tasks in the Mediterranean. Since then, NTOG teams have been deploying twice a year on six-month tours, normally in areas where an opposed boarding is possible, such as the southern Mediterranean, the Gulf of Guinea on the West Coast of Africa and the Horn of Africa on the East Coast.

The selection process for the unit has been described as a grueling five days, during which candidates are “put through a rigorous physical and mental selection process.”² If candidates are successful during NTOG selection, they will then be invited to attempt the Naval Tactical Operators Course (NTOC), a three-month long program that involves training in hand-to-hand combat, improvised explosive device identification, close quarters battle, tactical shooting and

¹ “Inside Canada’s New Navy Tactical Unit Taking on Drug Dealers, Pirates and Terrorists on the High Seas,” *National Post*, 17 July 2015.

² Lieutenant-Commander Wil Lund interviewed by Katelyn Moores, “Enhanced Naval Boarding Party Ready for Deployment,” *Royal Canadian Navy News*, 1 April 2015.

advanced medical training. The NTOG's first operator selection phase occurred in early 2014, with the first class graduating in March of 2015.

The graduated teams are deployed aboard Canadian warships with special equipment. This includes highly modified rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs) known as special operations RHIBs. Unlike standard navy RHIBs, these boats are faster and outfitted with advanced electronics and radar with much greater manoeuvrability. That speed and manoeuvrability is overkill for standard inspections, but crucial for catching a ship that is trying to escape.

When not at sea, the NTOGs train at CFB Esquimalt's Albert Head grounds in a 2,000 square foot simulated battlespace, known officially as the Close Quarters Battlehouse (CQB). This is an impressive structure; made from adjustable plywood walls and doors, resistant to damage from smoke, gas and water, and able to withstand sustained strikes from non-lethal munitions. (There is also the Marine Training Security Centre, Naval Boarding Party Trainer, Naval Annex Dockyard (NAD), in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, which is loosely associated with the NTOGs and is an RCN initiative.)

In the coming years the force is expected to grow. The navy's target is roughly 104 personnel by 2025. These small, versatile groups will continue to deploy aboard Canadian naval vessels to support the ships' organic boarding teams as the RCN works in some of the world's most dangerous waters.