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Personnel Vulnerabilities in the RCN

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Shortages in personnel have plagued the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) for decades and stabilization remains elusive to this day. While recent and significant changes have been made to past recruiting and retention strategies, the RCN is suffering from shortages in all but two of its 13 navy-specific managed occupations.¹ The reasons for these gaps are numerous and the details of this are not the intent of this paper; however, it should be acknowledged that history has shown that achieving an optimal workforce is extremely difficult, but not impossible. Campaigns such as *Operation Connection*, which sought to rebalance the RCN workforce in 2006 with heavy recruiting, were short-lived and recruiting has since waned. Despite shortfalls, the RCN continues to make headway and deliver operational effect, though at a cost.

Audits on recruitment and retention have demonstrated that, overall, recruiting has not achieved the intake necessary to meet the needs of the RCN.² The personnel shortfalls of the past and present have set the stage for today's challenges, raising concern about the RCN's ability to overcome future challenges and meet future mandates. Modest attrition and continual growth in the establishment have exacerbated insufficient recruiting, creating pressure for the navy to remain 'Ready Aye Ready.'

The aim of this paper is to identify the personnel shortages in the RCN and the vulnerabilities that exist due to systemic challenges of recruiting and retention. This paper will discuss the shortages in RCN-managed occupations and how personnel shortages have affected the service's vulnerability. Each factor associated with these instabilities provides further insight into the systemic personnel problem and provides a backdrop to potential solutions. Information presented herein relies heavily on previous audits and current statistics; however further study will be required as new recruiting and retention strategies evolve and change the personnel landscape in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

The RCN and Personnel Challenges

The personnel challenge is that there are too few people in the RCN to support the number of existing jobs. At the time this paper was written, in early 2021, the RCN Regular Force (RegF) establishment, or Trained Effective Establishment (TEE) for at sea and ashore positions was 7,527³

(i.e., the number of personnel the RCN needs). The Trained Effective Strength (TES), or the number of trained, employable sailors is 6,581, a delta of 946 personnel in the workforce.⁴ Expressed as a ratio, the TEE and TES provide a simplistic analysis of the overall health of an occupation, or combination of occupations. Overall, the RCN occupational health is 87.4%.⁵ An occupation that is above 95% is considered healthy and balanced, while occupations below that level require varying degrees of attention. Of the 13 RCN-managed occupations, only two are above 95%, while six others are below 90%.⁶ These six, ‘stressed’ occupations are of particular concern as these personnel gaps affect the RCN’s capacity to perform mandated duties.⁷

For every position that is not being filled, there is a shortcoming that needs to be managed. The greater the number of these vacancies, the greater the stress on the personnel within the organization. For occupations such as Naval Communicator (NAV COMM), the occupational health of which is 77.1%, or a vacancy of 168 sailors, the impact is significant and enduring.⁸ This has caused the RCN to prioritize positions in order to meet the needs of Force Employment (FE) at the expense of sustaining Force Generation (FG) and other capabilities.⁹ While this directive assists the positions that have been designated as high priority, many positions that could be argued to be ‘must fills’ remain vacant. Therein lies another layer to this complex issue in that priorities are not shared equally among the CAF, but this will not be addressed in this paper. The RCN must creatively manage the personnel gap, while aggressively restoring occupational health in order to perform its mandated duties.

The personnel shortages plaguing the RCN are putting additional strain on its serving members. As noted, nearly half (6 of 13) of RCN occupations are ‘stressed’ and have been so for several years. While prioritization by career managers mitigates some of these stresses, it is up to the organization that is lacking personnel to manage the gaps creatively. This often results in the division of work among unit members. Thus, either all or part of the tasks are distributed among the ranks so that capabilities are not fully lost because of the personnel vacancies. Managing the distribution of work can be difficult for supervisors, and it creates additional burden on those members left to fill the void.

The ongoing pandemic has had a substantial impact on the processing of new recruits, despite the relative increase in recruiting in 2020. Restrictions on the number of members available to train at any given time has limited the number of qualified members graduating, which has had an impact throughout the fleet. Additionally, the already stressed occupations have been challenged with providing additional instructors needed to increase throughput. This puts additional stress on an already sparsely populated organization, necessitating a re-organization of personnel in order to provide staff to relieve training bottlenecks.

For seagoing personnel, ‘pier head jumping’ is common. This means that an individual might come back from sea and ‘jump’ from one pier to the next, embarking on a departing ship that does not have the necessary expertise onboard. A 2018 study on retention in the RCN notes that many sailors believe the same individuals are constantly sailing and that many are unfairly selected or ‘hand-picked’ to sail more than others.¹⁰ There is a perception that some sailors exaggerate medical issues to avoid sailing and high tempo operations.¹¹ While the RCN has highly capable and determined sailors, even the best sailors can become overworked and weary, adding to the manning problem. Ongoing inability to satisfy intake requirements is increasing the potential “burn-out” of sailors, which can influence an occupation’s ability to deliver “excellence at sea.”¹²

The RCN has recently adopted a policy whereby any members exceeding a specific time away from home port will be interviewed by their chain of command to determine their suitability to

return to sea, followed by a recommendation to their respective Formation Commander.¹³ This approach provides a measure of personnel tempo that acknowledges and attempts to mitigate the strain on personnel. However, the underlying issue of insufficient staffing remains poignant.

Being overworked combined with the uncertainty of sailing schedules has had an impact on the mental health of sailors. Significant research has been done on the “psychological importance of certainty and control in a person’s life” and frequent sailing is a stress that can cause adverse physical and mental effects.¹⁴ Sailors require certainty in their sailing schedules such that they can balance their work and life requirements and remain effective in the forces. Filling the personnel gaps must be carefully managed as the risk of mental health issues will only serve to exacerbate the dilemma.

Under-staffing challenges have many consequences for those left to fill the void in capability, and in some cases lead to sailors no longer wishing to serve in the RCN. The RCN is relatively small in number when compared to other navies, and the loss of a single sailor, at any rank, will have an impact on capability. While attrition is accounted for in modelling intake requirements, it is only an estimate. Any unplanned or unexpected losses will have a lasting impact until a replacement is generated, particularly at the senior ranks.

Given the current TES of 6,581, and an average historical attrition of 7.1%¹⁵ the RCN loses approximately 467 sailors each year. The reasons for attrition are numerous, including the exhaustion discussed earlier; however that is not the focus of this paper. What remains critical for the navy is that recruiting exceeds attrition, especially in the many occupations that need to recover their occupational strength. During the fall 2020 Annual Military Occupation Review (AMOR), data dating back to 2015/16 revealed that attrition in the Sonar Operator (SONAR OP) occupation exceeded intake for four consecutive years.¹⁶ The intake has since increased above the number of annual releases, but a gap still exists nonetheless and it will take years to recover. The gap in strength has increased the importance of retention in the RCN as units are challenged to fill the voids.

While the future force structure accounts for attrition, including those reaching retirement age, the RCN must carefully balance the future force flow of its trained members against its recruiting campaign. Past recruiting failures have resulted in less personnel entering the workforce and thus pressure on those serving to fill the capability gaps continues to mount. A 2018 poll conducted by DRDC revealed that 49% of sailors were unsatisfied with their workload and pace of work¹⁷ and 12.3% of releases were attributed to personnel tempo.¹⁸ While this is only a small sample from sea-going sailors, excessive workload is clearly a source of dissatisfaction and is known to cause personnel to leave. In addition to attrition related to work loads for serving members, losing members at the beginning of their service due to work expectations, person-job fit and training is particularly high in the RCN and needs to be addressed.¹⁹ Significant effort has been dedicated to retention issues in the RCN as the experience and skills of those serving are critical in maintaining an effective force. Intake demands must be met in order to balance the workforce and relieve capability pressures; however, in some occupations, this demand will take over a decade to meet.

A significant impact on the personnel challenge involves the creation of positions, particularly positions that are created with relatively short notice and have not been accounted for in the intake planning process. Increases in RCN positions long into the future are accounted for in the process; however, given the increasing deficit in personnel strength, the RCN’s ability to generate trained personnel to the growing establishment is becoming increasingly difficult. As the RCN modernizes, the CAF’s appetite for growth is not balanced by the need to eliminate other, less

critical positions.

In Canada's latest defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* which was released in 2017, the CAF intends to increase the size of the military by 3,500 members²⁰ in order to achieve the government's long-term ambitions for the military. For the RCN, this would mean an increase of approximately 600 personnel, which has been incorporated into the intake planning tool used to determine intake requirements each year.²¹ The creation of positions is particularly challenging in the near term, especially given the apparent need for an increase at the senior level.²² One example of this is that in 2018, the RCN increased its NATO personnel by seven, all of whom are senior ranking members.²³ Any increase in positions at the senior rank are of particular concern given the time it takes to generate the skills and experience needed at that level.

In the current state of personnel in the RCN, the creation of these high priority positions typically results in another position becoming vacant, perpetuating the cycle of filling critical gaps by others in the unit. In some cases, the positions are repurposed and simply displaced to another unit. In cases where personnel gaps are too significant to be covered by re-assigning the duties of others, the position is left vacant and the capability lost.

The RCN has embarked on several Occupation Analyses (OA), which are designed to modernize the employment structure of each occupation being studied. Preliminary discussions suggest that an increase in RCN positions will be necessary for the proposed plans to be fully effective. The Clearance Divers (CL DVR) occupation, which is nearing implementation of its study, intends to increase its establishment by 26.5%. This substantial increase will require close management by the RCN such that the personnel are generated around the same time the position becomes established. Given the desire for higher ranking positions, timings do not often align. These intended establishment increases exacerbate the gap in the TEE and TES and the RCN is at risk of not producing enough trained personnel to meet its mandate.

As previously indicated, a consequence of inadequate manning is that demanding or required positions need to be filled at the expense of other, lower prioritized positions. For gaps at the next rank level, promotions appear to be the simplest solution. Although this does assist in shortages at the next rank, levels of experience can be prematurely cut short, creating a new set of challenges later in one's career. High performers should be rewarded, and that can come in the form of promotion, however caution needs to be exercised on what constitutes sufficient experience.

In 2016, a Naval Personnel Instruction on Experience Qualifications introduced a minimum experience level requirement that was issued for the purposes of succession planning and career management. But it included a waiver for those who did not receive the minimum standard. It also included a fast-track option for individuals showing great potential for advancement, despite not having the level of experience that was in many cases significantly higher for their predecessors in previous years. For Naval Warfare Officers (NWO), two director-level tours, consisting of hundreds of sea days and multiple years at sea, was common before any sailor was considered for advancement. Today, some sailors progress to the next career milestone with approximately 80 sea days and after a year as a director.²⁴ Force flow models have necessitated the use of these minimum requirements in order to fill the gaps at higher ranks, which is a risk for the institution and the member.

Additional consideration needs to be given to those who are fast tracked and achieve senior ranks too early. While this is potentially great for the individual, the impact on force flow is significant and can create a bottleneck for the progression of others. People only get promoted if a position is available at the next rank, which if not managed correctly, could delay future

promotions for multiple years.

Lastly, the fall 2020 AMORs noted that there are approximately 250 sailors older than 55 years of age and that roughly 1,000 members are beyond 25 years of service.²⁵ This is a significant data point given personnel strength deltas and the constant increase in the establishment that has already exposed the fragility of the force structure. Longevity in the service is never certain after a member becomes eligible for retirement, and the RCN could find itself in an even more dire manning situation now that the possible retirements out-number the current rates of recruitment.

Conclusion

The RCN is clearly challenged with personnel shortages that have endured for years, and will continue to affect navy vulnerability for years to come. There are not enough personnel to do the jobs that currently exist, yet those jobs need to be filled. As a result, members are overworked and personnel management is ad hoc, which among other factors, amplifies the importance of retention. The steady increase in the number of positions being created as the RCN modernizes further challenges its ability to achieve personnel target objectives, while lower than desirable experience levels among personnel who are being promoted are exposing potential issues in senior appointments.

The inability to generate sufficient sailors to relieve the pressures put upon those serving is not without consequence and there is great risk if this trend continues. While there are mitigating measures to relieve the numerous voids in the organization, pressure for positive change continues to mount. In order to reverse the helm and restore occupation balance, the RCN must meet its intake targets, ensure its sailors have a balanced workload with appropriate experience, and focus efforts to reduce attrition. While recruiting and retention strategies look promising, the RCN must ensure occupational health is not only restored, but maintained.

This will not be an easy task. It will require hard choices and strategies for the future. The following are recommendations that could help to address the problems of insufficient personnel.

1. It is recommended that the RCN reduce its operational tempo until such time that its long-term commitments can be satisfied. This would include a temporary reduction of at-sea commitments and a rebalancing of staff to support force generation and training opportunities alongside. If it did this, bottlenecks in the training system could be relieved and schools would be better positioned to manage the high flowthrough of expected enrollees.
2. A reduction in tempo would also include a revision and reduction in tasks and positions, and where applicable in the shore establishment, a re-allocation of tasks to a contracted, private sector agency. Vacancies ashore, especially at the middle management rank, could be alleviated by a civilian workforce both short and long term.

Although there are significant short-term efficiencies that could be gained by the recommendation to reduce the operational tempo of the RCN, there is also the opportunity to make lasting, long-term changes that will benefit the future establishment and health of the RCN. Indeed, the ongoing OAs intend to modernize RCN occupations and reconcile many legacy positions and tasks, and that might lead to a major re-organization of jobs and personnel requirements as new

ships join the fleet. In the end, with a re-appraisal of personnel requirements, and enhanced recruitment and retention, the navy will be better positioned for an enduring, capable workforce, well into the future.

Notes

1. Department of National Defence (DND), Director Naval Personnel, *RCN Managed Workforce Health: Current TES vs Positions* (Ottawa: Command Analytics Support Centre), January 2021, p. 1.
2. Auditor General of Canada, *Report 5, Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention - National Defence, of the Fall 2016 Reports of the Auditor General of Canada* (Canada. Parliament. Committee Reports, 2017), p. 2.
3. DND, Director Naval Personnel, *RCN Managed Workforce Health*, p. 1.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Auditor General of Canada, *Report 5, Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention*, p. 10.
8. DND, Director Naval Personnel, *RCN Managed Workforce Health*, p. 2.
9. DND, *Royal Canadian Navy Crewing Priorities - 2020 Through 2022* (National Defence Headquarters: file 3371-5320-1 (MCE STRAT)), 31 January 2020, p. 1.
10. Joanna Anderson, Erin Wing and Inez Dekker, Defence Research and Development Canada Scientific Report DRDC-RDDC-2018-R307, *Retention and Attrition in the Hard Sea Occupations* (Defence Research and Development Canada, 2018), p. 24.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
12. DND, *Action Items: RCN Annual Military Occupation Review 27-28 November 2018* (National Defence Headquarters: file 3371-1180-1), January 2019, p. 2.
13. DND, *NAVGEN 017/19, RCN Personnel Tempo* (Ottawa: DND, Canada, 2019), p. 1.
14. Anderson, Wing and Dekker, *Retention and Attrition in the Hard Sea Occupations*, p. 68.
15. Michelle Straver, email with author, 2 February 2021.
16. Carlos Esquivel, "Sonar Operator: 2020/2021 AMOR," Ottawa, 17 November 2020, with permission.
17. Anderson, Wing and Dekker, *Retention and Attrition in the Hard Sea Occupations*, p. 99.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
20. Canada, DND, *Strong, Secure, Engaged - Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa: DND, 2017), p. 19.
21. DND, *Promulgation of the Record of Discussion: RCN Annual Military Occupation Review 2020* (National Defence Headquarters: file 3371-5555-1), 25 January 2021, Annex A.
22. The shortage of higher ranks is an example of the ongoing ramifications of recruitment shortages. Recruiting slowed to a near halt in the early 2000s, so a gap was created all through the promotion process, which has become difficult to fill.
23. Jason Aitken, email with author, 24 January 2021.
24. DND, *NPI 13, Experience Qualifications* (Ottawa: DND, Canada, 2019), Annex A.
25. DND, *Promulgation of the Record of Discussion*, Annex A.