



Naval Tactical Operations Groups

The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), as a globally deployable and blue-water navy with a stake in preserving the security and safety of both Canadian and international waters, has long found a need to participate in boarding operations. While boarding operations in wartime may seek to seize control of a vessel, such missions in peacetime may involve authorized personnel boarding a ship for a certain, specified objective.¹ Indeed, investigating and responding to sanctions contraventions, drug trafficking, or smuggling often requires boarding merchant ships that are transiting to or from particular regions to examine the vessel's cargo to ensure it does not include passengers, drugs, or weapons that either do not appear on the ship's manifest or that violate international law. As such, boarding teams regularly perform inspections of such "vessels of interest," confirming identities and scrutinizing the cargo. Although rare, such activities can encounter resistance.

For the RCN, boarding parties have historically been composed of regular crew members for whom participating in boarding missions comprises a secondary duty. While boarding remains a part-time duty in the RCN, the need for a more intensively trained and dedicated force has become apparent, particularly during Canada's participation in Operation *Artemis*, the maritime security and counter-terrorism operation in the Middle East. While boarding teams could be called upon to inspect a fishing vessel in the Arabian Sea, they could also encounter Somali pirates armed with rocket-propelled grenades or AK-47 machine guns, or a boat carrying an armed crew guarding its illicit substances.² The possibility of encountering such vessels clearly called for a better-trained boarding team.

As a result, in 2014, Vice-Admiral Mark Norman, then the commander of the RCN, authorized the formation of the Maritime Tactical Operations Groups (MTOGs). Now called the Naval Tactical Operations Groups (NTOGs), these groups are intensely trained, specialty boarding teams that are designed to partake in more dangerous missions. The first 10-crewmember team sailed aboard HMCS *Winnipeg* in June 2015 to partake in counter-narcotics operations in the Caribbean Sea, followed by the Canadian mission in support of NATO's objectives in the Mediterranean. Since that time, NTOG teams have deployed twice annually on six-month tours, typically in regions like the southern Mediterranean, Horn of Africa, or Gulf of Guinea, in which a resisted boarding could be possible.

Personnel seeking to become involved in the unit must undergo a challenging five-day selection process, involving "a rigorous physical and mental selection process."³ Successful candidates then undertake the three-month Naval Tactical Operators Course (NTOC), which provides instruction in hand-to-hand combat, close-quarters battle, improvised explosive device (IED) identification, tactical shooting, and advanced medical procedures. The first operator selection phase under the NTOG took place in early 2014, and the inaugural class graduated in March 2015.

Upon graduation, these teams deploy on Canadian warships. They are equipped with special equipment, including significantly modified rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs). Referred to as special operations RHIBs, these are faster boats than typical navy RHIBs, and they are fitted with more manoeuvrable radar and advanced electronics. While this manoeuvrability and speed are not necessary for standard inspections, they are instrumental if the NTOG is required to pursue a fleeing vessel.

When not deployed at sea, the teams train at the Close Quarters Battlehouse (CQB). A simulated battlespace measuring 2,000 square feet, located at the Albert Head grounds at CFB Esquimalt, the Battlehouse is composed of adjustable doors and plywood walls that are capable of withstanding non-lethal munition strikes and that are resistant to water, gas, and smoke damage.⁴ This continued training ensures that the NTOG teams remain capable of deploying on RCN vessels in support of the vessels' boarding teams and operations in more dangerous and threatening waters. These versatile and small groups are anticipated to grow in number in the years to come, with the RCN aiming to involve approximately 104 personnel in their NTOG teams by 2025.

References

¹ The authorized personnel participating in the boarding may be contingent on the location of the vessel being boarded – for instance, the coast guard if in national waters, or a navy in international waters if authorized by its government or an international body like the United Nations.

² “Inside Canada’s New Navy Tactical Unit Taking on Drug Dealers, Pirates and Terrorists on the High Seas,” *National Post*, July 17, 2015.

³ Lieutenant-Commander Wil Lund interviewed by Katelyn Moores, “Enhanced Naval Boarding Party Ready for Deployment,” *Royal Canadian Navy News*, April 1, 2015.

⁴ The Marine Training Security Centre, Naval Boarding Party Trainer, Naval Annex Dockyard (NAD), located in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, and an initiative of the RCN, is also associated with the NTOGs.