

Fact Sheet

HMCS KOOTENAY - "We Are As One"

The Kootenay disaster of October 1969 is known as the worst peacetime accident in the history of the Royal Canadian Navy. A number of factors combined, contributed to the severity of the incident. Yet, it was the ability and the bravery of the Ship's Company to respond quickly and without panic, that prevented the original explosion and resulting hellish fire, from escalating into even greater calamity. As the Captain, Commander Neil Norton would later write, "a less professional crew could easily have finished the day in life rafts".

- On October 23, 1969, an explosion ripped through the engine's starboard gearbox of the Destroyer Escort, HMCS KOOTENAY, when it was approximately 200 miles off the south west coast of England.
- As result of the fire and deadly toxic smoke created by the explosion, nine (9) crewman died and fifty-three (53) were seriously injured. Years later, the disaster remains deeply imprinted in the memories of the survivors.
- The ship had been part of a nine vessel Task Group (along with HMCS ships: Bonaventure, Terra Nova, Fraser, St. Laurent, Ottawa, Assiniboine, Margaree and Saguenay).
- Kootenay and Saguenay were detached early that day to conduct routine full power trials.
- At 08:10, just after the morning watch had been relieved, the order was given "full speed ahead both engines".
- Within eleven minutes disaster had struck. At 08:21 a bearing in the starboard gearbox failed. Its casing had been improperly installed and the oil intended to circulate through it as a coolant overheated, reportedly at 650 Celsius.
- With the pressure in the engines up to its maximum for the ship to be under full power, the bearing exploded rupturing the gearbox. A massive wall of fire blasted the ten men working in the engine room, burning them as it raged through the space.
- Of the ten men in the engine room, three miraculously escaped and survived. The Engineering Officer made it all the way to the bridge and reported on the explosion indicating that there was an immediate need to shut off the steam to the engines.

- In the engine room, the pump feeding the lubricating oil to the ruptured gearbox continued to spew lubricant around the engine room fueling the flames. The intense heat and deadly smoke foiled attempts to close the valves of the severed oil line.
- The fire surged out of the Engine Room and into the main cafeteria, where a group of sailors were finishing morning coffee. Very quickly they were surrounded by flames and smoke. Although they had a nightmarish experience, all but one eventually escaped to the upper deck. The one who expired, did so as a result of the smoke inhalation injuries he had sustained.
- Meanwhile, three sailors on duty in the wheelhouse, forward of the Engine Room, found their six by six space rapidly overtaken by smoke. They stayed put however, until they could reach the bridge and obtain permission to leave their posts. Once the wheelhouse was evacuated, the ship was left steaming across the Atlantic at full speed (since the Boilers were stoked to full pressure) and completely out of control.
- Remaining crew members rallied on the Quarter Deck and swiftly organized firefighting equipment and rescue operations. One key task was to keep the magazine area hosed down to prevent overheating, as the ship's ammunition was stored just behind the bulkhead shared with the Engine Room.
- Most of the firefighting equipment and the Chemox breathing apparatus were stored in Burma Road (the main passageway) and were rendered inaccessible or destroyed by the fire. As a result, a few resourceful Ship's Divers strapped on their SCUBA tanks and went below to assist in rescue operations.
- With the electrical system destroyed in the blaze, the ship could not radio for help. It was some time before the backup generator was started. In the meantime, an Officer fired an emergency red flare to alert the other ships which were all out of sight, over the horizon.
- Eventually, the other ships realized Kootenay was in trouble. Helicopters were deployed immediately and fire fighting equipment and specially trained personnel from other ships were dropped off on Kootenay. To accomplish this, the helicopter pilots had to fly dangerously close to Kootenay's quarterdeck (guard rails) since Kootenay did not have a flight deck.
- The fire was out by 10:30, but it would not be until 12:15 that the heat had abated sufficiently, and the site was secure enough for the damage to be assessed. The heat in the Engine Room was so intense that it melted the aluminum ladder leading out of the space and it also "bowed out" the side of the ship's hull.
- At the time of the Kootenay tragedy, several sailors were traumatized and suffered psychological disorders, which condition was not recognized by the military medical

system. Only in recent years have the crew members been recognized as PTSD victims, for which they are offered professional counseling.

- The Kootenay burials at sea, just outside Plymouth England, were the last full body funerals conducted by the RCN.
- The Kootenay crew members buried in the Brookwood Cemetery, just outside of London, were the last Canadian Service Members to be interred in the country in which they died. Since then, all Canadian military members are repatriated to CANADA FOR BURIAL.
- In 1972, Canada adopted their own version of military medals for bravery, and six Kootenay sailors were among the first recipients.
- As a result of the lessons learned from the Kootenay disaster, the RCN made significant and positive changes to their ships to ensure they were safer for their sailors.
- Likewise, several Navies throughout the world made similar changes to their ships to ensure much higher safety standards.

For thirty years the Kootenay tragedy was completely ignored. In October 1999 the RCN decided to have a reunion and a commemoration ceremony for the Kootenay survivors. It was such a success an annual event has taken place ever since.

Over time, the Kootenay story became well known and is often referred to as a defining moment in the history of the RCN.

Eventually, the Kootenay survivors received a number of tributes from various organizations.

- In 2003, a new state of the art Damage Control facility was opened and named KOOTENAY.
- Admiral P. Maddison presented the crew of the Kootenay with the RCN Certificate of Appreciation.
- Mayor Mike Savage proclaimed 23 October as “Kootenay Day”.
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- The Lt. Governor of Nova Scotia, J.J. Grant, presented the Kootenays with “the Government House Gold Medal”.
- At the fifty-year commemoration ceremony, VADM A. McDonald presented the crew of the Kootenay with the inaugural Commander RCN Unit Commendation.

- In 2019, a Kootenay lapel ribbon was created and approved for wear by members of the RCN on 23 October in perpetuity across Canada.
- To date, fourteen Kootenay crew members were recognized and awarded with the “wound stripe”.
- Other Kootenays were recognized by their home province: a lake in Manitoba was named after E. Harman and an island was named after T. Crabbe. Lakes in Ontario were named after L. Stringer, N. Galloway and M. Hardy. A brook in Nova Scotia was named after W. Boudreau.
- Allan (Dinger) Bell received the Minister of Veterans Affairs Commendation award in 2020.
- The weather station at Chebucto Head was renamed the Kootenay weather station.

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