

No, The Navy Hasn't Forgotten How To Paint Ships

Of all the criticisms directed at the RCN Navy these days, one of the most persistent is also one of the strangest.

Every time a photograph of a Canadian warship appears online, someone inevitably zooms in on a rust streak and declares that sailors have lost their pride, standards have slipped, and nobody paints ships anymore. The reality is that painting a warship in 2026 bears little resemblance to painting a warship in 1986.

Many veterans fondly remember the days when annual deployments often included extended visits to Roosevelt Roads AKA (Rosey Roads), Puerto Rico in Jan. The weather was warm, operational demands were often lighter, tropical routine of painting ship in the morning before the heat got too bad, a BBQ and the rest of the day on the beach with a drink or two. Crews were larger, and entire sections of the ship could be devoted to preservation work. Chipping, grinding, priming, and painting were routine parts of naval life. Some sailors jokingly referred to these trips as government funded paint ship cruises. A ship could spend weeks tackling preservation projects that would be difficult to imagine today.

Today's sailors operate in a completely different environment. Modern warships carry vastly more complex combat systems, communications equipment, sensors, networks, and engineering systems than their predecessors. The same sailors who might once have spent a day painting lifelines are now maintaining missile systems, satellite communications networks, advanced radars, helicopter facilities, cyber systems, and increasingly sophisticated engineering plants. Couple that with endless refresher training, mandatory courses, qualifications, lectures, exercises, inspections, and operational commitments, and there is simply less time available for large-scale preservation work. That is not an excuse. It is the reality of life aboard a modern RCN warship.

Environmental regulations have also fundamentally changed how painting is conducted. The robust marine paints of decades past contained chemicals that would never meet today's environmental or workplace safety standards. Modern coatings are far more environmentally friendly, but they are often less forgiving and require extensive surface preparation, specific temperature and humidity conditions, containment measures, and strict hazardous material controls before a single brush ever touches steel.

The result is that large scale paint ship is no longer something routinely conducted by ship's staff while alongside or deployed. Instead, modern warships undergo major preservation periods during scheduled docking work periods, often every five years, where specialized contractors blast, repair, and recoat entire sections of the vessel using industrial equipment and controlled processes. In many cases, a ship receives more comprehensive preservation during one docking period than a crew could achieve through years of touch up painting.

That does not mean sailors have stopped painting. Far from it. Touch ups and rust removal continue to be conducted where practical and operationally necessary. However, the days of sending a dozen sailors onto the upper deck with paint rollers and unlimited supplies are largely gone. Today's work must comply with environmental regulations, maintenance plans, safety requirements, and operational commitments.

Even removing a small patch of rust now requires considerable preparation. Containment measures must be put in place to prevent rust, paint chips, dust, and other contaminants from going over the side. Many ports prohibit painting, chipping, grinding, or similar maintenance activities altogether. At sea, MARPOL regulations and environmental protection measures often restrict this type of work in many operating areas. What was once a simple maintenance task has become a carefully controlled evolution.

Perhaps the biggest misconception is that a rust streak equals a lack of pride. Any sailor who has spent time at sea knows better. Salt water is relentless. A ship can leave harbour looking immaculate and return a week later with fresh corrosion beginning to appear. The ocean does not care how much effort went into yesterday's paint job.

The truth is that modern sailors are no less professional and no less proud of their ships than the generations that came before them. They simply operate under different realities. The navy has evolved. Maintenance practices have evolved. Environmental standards have evolved. The mission has evolved.

Rust, however, remains as stubborn as ever.

Some things in the navy never change.