

HMCS VENTURE IN RETROSPECT

By

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The traditional naval toast of the day for Wednesday is; TO OURSELVES often followed by the rejoinder "because no one else really cares." It is my intention to focus on "ourselves" more specifically creating the band of brothers, surface, subsurface and air, who received their basic officer training at the Royal Canadian Navy's third naval college, HMCS Venture from 1954-1966. This retrospective look examines the early days, the "invention" of Venture, its mission in and its impact on the RCN and the personalities that made it work. It will argue that HMCS Venture was a journeyman's naval college that produced solid, dedicated professional officers that powered the navy and air force in later years. Their loyalty first and last was to the navy and their classmates - the band of brothers. Also, this paper is a tribute to our founding Captain, Rear Admiral Bob Welland, who died three weeks ago at the age of 92.

The creation of Venture is part of the larger story in which the postwar RCN struggled to produce sufficient officers and men to complement the massively expanding fleet and its naval aviation component. This was not a tidy process because as in WWII the RCN clearly over-committed itself in setting NATO force goals. In March 1948, the strength of the navy stood at 6,860. The authorized ceiling for 1960 was 21,000, a 300 percent increase. The RCN was in the order of 895 officers short in 1953 projected to grow to 1400.¹ This gap was being filled temporarily by officers from World War II. "Retreads" would not suffice for modern ships and aircraft ordered.² In the opinion of Captain Bob Welland, then Director of Naval training, the current officer training system that depended on Canadian Service Colleges(CSC) and University Naval Training Divisions(UNTD) schemes was "dysfunctional".³ He would fix it.

HMCS Venture was conceived as part of the solution, an "emergency plan", for rapidly increasing officer production. The new officer training establishment was authorized by the Naval Board in October, 1953. It had two objectives: to bridge the production gap of 100 a year and to make up the deficit of the 895 officers.⁴ What became known as "the Venture Plan" was to be a common entry for all branches. Venture cadets would undergo two years of professional training including sea time and be educated beyond Senior Matriculation level. A total entry of 276 cadets of all branches was authorized for 1954. The plan would be continued for ten years. Venture would be financed from the naval estimates with no new money. HMCS Venture was to be a naval college in every aspect except title and a pretender to Royal Roads ready if or when it failed. The RCN wanted a naval college having lost Royal Roads in 1947.⁵ However HMCS Venture

would be kept low profile to avoid any suggestion that the navy was moving away from the tri-service concept.

Captain Bob Welland was both an inspired and fortuitous choice to "invent" and command HMCS Venture. He had won the DSC in two wars and was regarded as the premier destroyer driver in the RCN, a perfect role model for aspiring young naval officers. Naval war fighting was hard, demanding and dangerous work and Welland was a born leader. "Serving under Bob Welland was better than being on leave", said a former Chief. And most of all, Welland was imbued with that greatest of all Royal Navy traditions, winning. Two Wellandisms were; "Never lose, it's not fun", and do everything "full-throttle".

Welland had been a special entry cadet and had no preconceived notions what Venture should be. He had been the Executive Officer at Royal Canadian Naval College Royal Roads in 1946 but was not impressed.⁶ The syllabus was set by academics from RMC and the cadets were under-challenged and bored stiff - civilians in uniform. Worse there was no requirement to serve and nothing to instil loyalty to the RCN. Royal Roads was an expensive waste of time for the navy. Venture would be different.

Welland informed the Venture cohort in the naval cultural norm. Welland subscribed to the belief that to be a naval officer was to belong to a special breed, a "band of brothers" with a unique calling to duty and service. The Welland touch would be apparent in every aspect of cadet development - work hard-play hard but always follow the rules of the game, be a gracious winner or a good loser, continuously strive for excellence, suffer in silence, neither howl for the moon nor cry over spilt milk, and always think in the terms of what is best for the naval service. Welland wrote a primer on social graces for cadets. "Neptune's Notes".⁷ The manual is elitist, sexist and deliciously politically incorrect by today's standards but expressed the RCN cultural norm of 1954. His philosophy guided and directed the operation of HMCS Venture through the 12 years of its existence.

The emphasis at Venture was to be officer development not behaviour modification. Building officer-like-qualities or OLQ's, was the primary objective. This would be achieved by immersing the cadets in a professional naval and academic environment under constant supervision "operating full-throttle" 24/7 for 11 months a year.⁸ A cadet's daily bread would be the Royal Canadian Navy; his credo Service above every personnel consideration. His first duty was to his ship and his men. HMCS Venture was a post-Mainguy Report endeavour, a blend of old and new. Venture was ambitious but no more so than Welland was for the RCN, and himself.

Bob Welland knew that HMCS Venture would succeed only if the best personnel available of all ranks were selected to launch the college. He was a proficient team builder and surrounded himself with proven performers loyal to him. He chose Commander Ray Phillips, a meticulous organizer "who was good

with young people and had young ideas", to be his Executive Officer".⁹ Phillips' own influence was extraordinary. Vice Admiral Chuck Thomas commented, "Commander Phillips was to me a man of great knowledge. My sense then was that he made things work. He knew who could do what, and when and to what effect. This was a model I came to adopt."¹⁰ To Venture cadets Welland was the "godlike" figure and Phillips made it work.

Phillips adopted the Royal Roads naval college model for organization. The wheel would not be reinvented. Venture would run like an RCN warship in every respect of dress, routine, ceremonial, and language. The cadets' uniform was the RCN standard with some slight modifications. Rear Admiral Pullen, Chief of Naval Personnel, insisted that the cadets wear fedora hats with plain clothes, the walking out rig. A cadet would learn to behave like a naval officer in every respect. The programme replicated some aspects of the new-entry recruit training at HMCS Cornwallis to teach cadets what to expect as divisional officers. Cadets would learn to be thorough seaman in boats, read Morse code and practiced in drill and ceremonial. Phillips' challenge was to achieve a balance between teaching conformance and developing professional skills and self esteem. He achieved his objective. As Chuck Thomas remarked, "Venture as a starting place did something right."¹¹

Welland asked Commander George Amyot to be his Director of Studies. Amyot had served with Welland at Royal Roads and was the current Director of Studies at College Militaire Royale. Highly competent, Amyot, a francophone, was a big man part native Indian and former professional football player. Welland commented "George was tough, and the cadets loved him."¹² Amyot convinced Welland that allocation of cadet billets should be proportionate to provincial population and that Venture should be bi-lingual, offering instruction in both official languages. Although short lived, a bi-lingual establishment would be a first in the RCN, an idea ahead of its time. It would require more staff but Welland agreed on the stipulation that all instructors be naval officers. To do this the navy emptied HMCS D'Iberville of its bi-lingual instructor officers.

Amyot knew that the greatest challenge would be to motivate cadets to survive the daunting challenges presented by "the college". Amyot's directive, "How To Stay In Venture" became a guide for staff and a mantra for cadets.¹³ Initially, Venture would be a "bewildering mill" for harassed new cadets rushed off their feet. The cadets had to be stabilized quickly and taught tools for survival. It was about "acquiring self-discipline and learning to think for one's self. VENTURE is a place for adults, not an advanced school for children."¹⁴ Hit the deck running, study hard, develop good study habits, make and keep to a plan, and "the conscientious application of energy was indispensable."¹⁵ Passing required a fulltime effort. The bottom line was attitude. It was about winning. Losing would not be fun.

Welland set about inventing Venture in mid-1953; from "scheming to "Fall in" at Esquimalt took less than a year."¹⁶ There was both a sense of urgency and need for economy. Everything; a home, staff, material support, a training ship and money had to be found within existing RCN resources. The first year intake of 175 cadets had to be recruited. The complement was set at a maximum of 300 cadets with 85 naval and 57 civilian personnel on the staff. The former HMCS Givenchy buildings in the heart of the Esquimalt Dockyard were selected to accommodate Venture.¹⁷ The facilities were less than ideal but conveniently located should Royal Roads fail. HMCS Ontario, a cruiser, was designated as the training ship and HMCS Oriole assigned as Venture's sail training vessel.

Set to open on 10 September, 1954, rapidly Venture came together materially as a very basic journeyman naval college to handle the first intake. No effort was spared by Rear Admiral Jimmy Hibbard who put all the resources of Pacific Command behind the enterprise.¹⁸ It was a rapid makeover producing instant basic facilities including science and language labs, and a chapel. New buildings would have to be built to accommodate over 250 cadets in the second year. Uniforms, beds, desks, table china, sports' gear, boats and all the necessities were ordered. On arrival all cadets had beds but no desks and no basic working uniforms for three weeks. Venture had the look of "hurry" when it opened.¹⁹ A later Captain would complain that Venture was like the Ford production line when compared to the Rolls Royce facilities of Royal Roads.²⁰ But Welland saw only opportunity and was very pleased with the result. He commented with satisfaction, "It was a great credit to my senior officers that we got everything that we asked for."²¹ The navy had its college.

The recruiting campaign started in the spring with the target set at 160 cadets. It was estimated that Canada produced 16,000 males with junior matriculation each year and only 1 in 40 could pass the air crew medical. Brochures advertizing for "suitable young men aged 16 to 18 with Junior Matriculation or equivalent" were pushed out to recruiting centres and to schools across Canada. Special recruiting teams were sent out to scour the provinces.²² The fleet, HMCS Cornwallis and reserve divisions were canvassed for candidates. In 1954, Venture caught the attention of over 1,000 young men who applied. Of these 164 including 16 from the fleet were selected. The reasons for joining varied - some had always wanted to join the navy or had a sea cadet background, or Dad or Uncle Harry was in the navy during the war. For some it was adventure, some to fly, others because there was no money for university, others just to get out of a small town or away from the prairie winters. Recruiting Quebecers was a challenge but BC and Alberta made up the short fall.²³ The final selection was made by Welland himself.

September arrived and a ritual to be repeated by ten consecutive Venture classes began. Successful candidates were notified by NSHQ, received joining instructions from Venture and

a travel warrant designed to put them all on the same cross-Canada train. The 16 French-speaking of 34 Quebecers had been mustered at HMCS D'Iberville earlier for basic English training. The train was met in Vancouver by a Chief Petty officer and the hopefuls, awkwardly attired in suits, bussed to the CPR ferry for Victoria. Thence bussed to the Esquimalt dockyard and cast into chaos - Amyot's "bewildering mill" with everything going "full throttle". Of many first impressions, one with Biblical connotations stands out, "Everyone spoke in a strange tongue with flames of fire". Another wrote, "Everyone was yelling that I was doing something wrong but no one had bothered to tell me how to do it correctly."²⁴ Another [Doug Hinchliffe] wrote home being "just dazed" and "I don't know whether I'll be able to stick it or not".²⁵ Welland had a "talk" with the cadets remarking, "...when you were attested you became professionals in a great service and you will find it a great adventure. You will lend your enthusiasm to all we do."²⁶ And he told them to win.

Systematically the Venture staff spearheaded by superb Chief Petty Officers with huge voices created order from chaos. Supervised and regulated 24/7, immersed in naval environment, surrounded by the sights, sounds and bustle of the busy dockyard, young Canadians became functioning naval cadets. They were organized and housed in four divisions, four cadets to a cubicle, every French-speaking cadet with three English speakers. The gaggle became an efficient ship's company. Team work developed through drill, sports, boat work and sailing. There were constant inspections. They ran every where and everything was done at the rush.

Without any senior cadets the burden of supervision fell completely on the senior NCO's. Their influence on that and subsequent classes was decisive according to evidence, more so than the Executive and instructor officers. Many of these be-medalled WWII veterans were legends. CPO Sam Shaw, the biggest man in the navy, scored the highest marks recorded on the RN's gunnery course. He would straighten a slouching cadet's shoulders with a vice-like grip and was always available when on duty to tutor cadets in mathematics.²⁷ CPO Draginda, the chief steward, who had orchestrated a mess dinner for the Queen. Draginda moved up and down the tables in the dining hall like a wary escort through lines in a convoy. "Mr. Cameron. Knife in the right hand and fork in the left curve on top, you'll get used to it".²⁸ "Mr Mason. Elbows off the table it will not float away." "Mr. Farquhar. Don't shovel in your food. It is unbecoming a gentlemen." CPO Frank "Cheyenne" Boddy was probably the homeliest man in the RCN, full of colourful language (swearing was forbidden) and anecdotes. He took great pride in his "weasels" and was admired universally.²⁹ The chiefs conveyed respect and fostered self esteem. They taught the language and demonstrated through example how the naval culture functioned. The point is the cadets busted themselves to please these chiefs. They never forgot that they became naval officers through them. Ventures learned the RCN at base was men not ships

and you never let them down. This is the heart of the Venture story.

A cadet had to be turned into a competent junior officer in two short years. The first year heavy on academics was followed by a year of professional training and cruising. Attrition was inevitable. Of the 164 entries 102 graduated.³⁰ Welland set the Venture standard high and maintained it. Headquarters expressed alarm at the high attrition. Welland responded that Venture's wastage was less than similar service establishments and that he had no intention of sending the unfit out into the fleet. The navy would have to recruit to a higher standard and be more selective with applicant screening but the standard could not be lowered.³¹

HMCS Venture continued until 1966. It operated longer than both the RNCC and Royal Roads. In 1955, there were 250 cadets, the highest in college history. Welland left in 1956 as did Philips and Amyot. Venture morphed into the Short Service Officer Plan(SSOP) in 1964 and was reduced to 14 months. But the story in the post-Welland era is for another time.

Venture graduated 462 naval officers including 15 Belgians and 202 pilots. In the short term Venture produced officers in a hurry to man ships and aircraft of the RCN during a period of rapid expansion. Without Venture the fleet could not have sailed in manning crisis of the 1960's. The Tribals and frigates were manned almost exclusively by Venture officers. Later, most of the submarine officers would also be Ventures; seven passed the RN "Perisher" to command boats. The majority of pilots in the Naval Air Squadrons flying off the "Bonnie" in the 60's were Venture graduates. Ventures were the first pilots to train to fly helicopters from DDH's. Thirteen Venture pilots were killed in the performance of their duty.³²

The long term impact of Venture to the navy and air force was the many career officers who transferred to the permanent force. In the 80's and 90's the majority of officers in senior ranks of the navy were graduates of Venture. Venture produced 13 naval flag officers including three Vice Admirals who served as the Commander Maritime Command, one as VCDS, a Commodore of Naval Divisions, and a Commodore in both the RAN and RNZN. At one point the majority of ships and squadron were commanded by Ventures. Bob Welland rose to rear admiral, and another Venture Executive Officer, Andy Collier, to vice admiral and became the Maritime Commander. In the air force, Venture contributed one Brigadier General, 15 Colonels, and 14 Lieutenant Colonels who commanded squadrons, groups, wings, and bases.³³ It was reported, when it came to the selection board process, the Venture pilot graduates invariably out shone their opposite numbers on the list from the Air Force and Army.³⁴ One Belgian rose to Lieutenant General to be CAS. The last Venture graduate retired in 2002, 48 years after Venture started.³⁵

The impact in the civilian sphere was equally impressive. The graduates who retired early or after full service careers went on to be diplomats, doctors, clerics, lawyers, business

executives, architects, accountants, authors, artists, academics, teachers, and charter boat operators to name a few. Pilots twin-engine qualified were immediately recruited by grateful airlines. The Venture graduates include: two former MP's, one a cabinet minister, a former ambassador, a provincial court judge, a Doctor of Divinity, several PhD's, a president of a community college, the current President of the Justice Institute of BC, a former Senior pilot of Air Canada, two members of the BC Jazz Hall of Fame, and a doctor who delivered over 10,000 babies. Regardless of a primarily service or civilian career graduates are unanimous in their view that Venture was decisive in teaching them self esteem, leadership, team work and to succeed. They remain loyal to their classmates and the navy. The reunion last September in Halifax was attended by over 350 persons including Bob Welland. The *Signal*, the Venture Association newsletter, has 506 subscribers. The association is open to all who served Venture not just graduates. HMCS Venture was after all a ship; a "stone frigate" albeit, but a ship nevertheless. The history of HMCS Venture is permanently displayed in the Welland Room at NOTC Venture re-established in 1976. The navy could not function without a Venture to train naval officers.

HMCS Venture had a very good run. The pity is that it was too short and they broke the mould when it was finished. Venture was a period piece, of its time and for its time - dated possibly but not with respect to values. In a purely naval environment it produced that last "band of brothers" in the Canadian navy. In retrospect are they proud to be Ventures? You are damn right they are! Keep on "full throttle". Thanks Bob Welland.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Naval Board Minutes 7/10/53
 - ² "Why Venture" Welland Reunion 2010 Programme
 - ³ Ibid
 - ⁴ Naval Board Minutes 7/10/53
 - ⁵ Welland to CNP 7/5/53 Welland Papers (in author's possession)
 - ⁶ Welland Interview
 - ⁷ "Neptune's Notes" Introduction.
 - ⁸ Waller et al memoirs
 - ⁹ Welland Interview
 - ¹⁰ Thomas memoir
 - ¹¹ Ibid
 - ¹² Welland Interview
 - ¹³ "How to stay in Venture" G. Amyot, Welland Papers
 - ¹⁴ Ibid
 - ¹⁵ Ibid
 - ¹⁶ Welland letter Signal Winter, 1994
 - ¹⁷ CNP to VCNS 16/2/54, Welland Papers
 - ¹⁸ Welland Interview
 - ¹⁹ "Talk to Cadets" 15/9/54, Welland Papers
 - ²⁰ HMCS Venture RofP 14/12/56
 - ²¹ Welland Interview
 - ²² Turner Interview
 - ²³ Ibid.
 - ²⁴ Archer memoir
 - ²⁵ Hinchcliffe Papers (in author's collection)
 - ²⁶ "Talk to Cadets"
 - ²⁷ Author's experience
 - ²⁸ Cameron memoir
 - ²⁹ Author's experience
 - ³⁰ HMCS Venture RofP 15/6/56
 - ³¹ Welland to Groos ltr 15/1/55 Welland papers
 - ³² HMCS Venture "In Remembrance" Book
 - ³³ Verroneau Memo
 - ³⁴ RAdm Edwards in Soward, *Hands to Flying Stations* (II)
 - ³⁵ B Maclean memoir