

History of Naval Health in Esquimalt

Throughout the long and proud history of the Navy in Esquimalt, it often goes unrecognized that the origins of the current Dockyard and Naden Bases lie not in the provision of services to ships and crews, but in the establishment of hospitals and respite wards.

Indeed, we trace our lineage back to 1854 during the Crimean War. It was during this conflict with Russia that the need first arose from the Royal Navy to have a place for sick and injured crew. The following year, three buildings were constructed to provide this service. It was not until 1862 that Esquimalt came to prominence as a Royal Navy Base.



Medical Officers' Quarters, Royal Naval Hospital Esquimalt, 1862

As time passed and the needs of the RN in Esquimalt grew, land was set aside and permanent buildings were constructed for health services in what has become NADEN. From the late 1860's to 1905, several complexes of buildings were constructed including an Officer's Ward, administration and surgery building, and a Men's Ward.

It was during this time that numerous RN Surgeons observed the health benefits of Vancouver Island. With its temperate climate, efforts were made to use Esquimalt as a place of respite following duty and action throughout the Pacific. In 1862 the hospital moved to larger quarters formerly occupied by the Engineers. It moved again in 1887 to new purpose built facilities on what has become Museum Square. At the time, the facilities were recorded as being "a hospital system perfect in every detail". The only comparable care on the island was found at the New Royal Jubilee Hospital, completed several years later.

The RN at this time maintained that at all times ships would sail with the presence of a Sick Berth Attendant. Despite difficult conditions and often-rudimentary training, the medical staff on ships, or "Tiffies", as they were known, were considered invaluable for the health, fitness, and morale of the sailors they served with. The original of the name "Tiffies" comes from a restructuring in the RN in the early 1800s; which saw the creation of special classes and duties of sailors on ships, such as, Carpenter, Machinist and Engine Room Artificers. Sailors nicknamed these specialists "Tiffies". Sick bay personnel, being "Body Mechanics" were put into the same category.



Officers' Ward, Royal Naval Hospital Esquimalt, 1873

The origin of the term "Sick bay" is also an interesting one. It is surmised that it came from the change in RN resulting from a greater awareness of health, hygiene and sanitation principles that removed the common practice of taking live animals out to sea to provide fresh food.

The animals used to be kept at the very front of the ship in the "Manger". When that space became available the Tiffies moved into it from their dank and unhealthy below decks location. As ship at this time became more rounded in shape or "bay-like" the common name of Sick bay came into use.

With the British Empire becoming uncertain of events on the European Continent at the turn of the 20th century, RN ships were pulled out of Colonial ports and return to home waters. Shortly after this the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was born (1910) and took over the facilities in Esquimalt. However due to the small size of the Navy at this time, many of the building fell into disuse. The First World War saw a great rise in the numbers of ships and sailors passing through and using NADEN and construction of two additional convalescent hospitals in 1916.

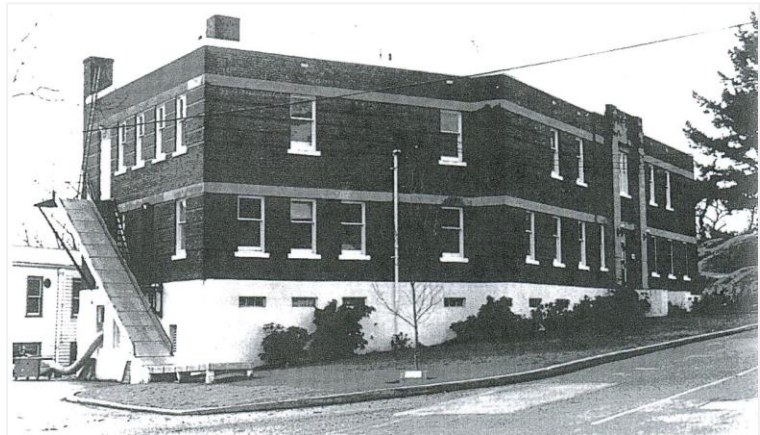
The interwar years saw drastic cutback for Defence across the country.

For the RCN, this resulted in the provision of a single Sick Bay Steward/Sick Berth Attendant for many years. As the threat of war loomed in the late 1930's, increase in funding allowed some small advancements and hiring of additional staff. This later proved to be a critical step in preparing the way for a cadre of trained medical personnel to provide expertise to the ballooning RCN of the Second World War.

The RCN had no separate medical capability until 1940 when the Director of Naval Medical Services was established. A year later the first RCN Hospital opened in NADEN. The first Sick Berth Attendants were trained in England until the Medical Division opened at Fleet School Naden in 1942 where future Sick Bay Artificers were trained.

The RCN Hospital located in building 54 was a permanent and modern medical facility which remained in use until the present Blair Maclean hospital was open on 14 February 1986.

In 1991 under the reorganization of the Medical Branch with OP PHOENIX the unit ceased to be fully functioning hospital and became Formation Health Services Unit (Pacific), clinic that supported the needs of the RCN and region.



Since 2002 the clinic has been restructured under the Primary Care Renewal Initiative. This project significantly changed how health services are provided to CF personnel. Fitting with this major change, the unit became the Canadian Forces Health Services Centre (Pacific) in September 2003. The clinic provides dedicated care to military personnel in Victoria and throughout British Columbia with over 140 health care professionals.

From the beginning, the naval presence in Esquimalt has been fundamental to the development of the community and character of the region. Throughout this, the assurance and sure capability to respond and deal with the health concerns of personnel serving the Pacific Fleet has been the proud role of the men and women of the CF H Svcs C (Pacific).

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For additional historical photographs visit: [Pilgrim's Rest or the Admiralty Royal Navy Hospital](#)