



The Wartime Experience of Fishermen and Cannery Workers in B.C., 1938-1949

By Brielle Lalonde and Rebekah Rustad

Feeding the Front Lines

When Canada declared war on Germany on September 10, 1939, the North Pacific coast of British Columbia was tasked with supplying allied troops with freshly canned salmon. Thanks to its nutrients and protein content, canned Salmon was an important part of British, Canadian, and American troops' diets.

Beginning in 1939 the province of British Columbia's fish packing industry came under complete wartime controls imposed by the Government of Canada. Under these controls Great Britain received 70% of British Columbia's canned salmon pack from 1942 to 1946.

“During the war, the government took some of the fish- seventy percent of the pack, I think. You had to sell to them, but you didn’t object because that was just what we had to do for the war.”

- Ritchie Nelson, Port Edward Cannery

(Background Image)
North Pacific Cannery,
1940s. (BC Archives).

“You know, when the war was on none of us were just canning for ourselves. It was a government pack. So it was just a question of getting rid of the fish as fast as it came in.”

- Harry Robins, Port Edward Cannery

For Ruichi Yoshida, a Japanese worker from Vancouver Island, the increased war time production allowed him to have a steady paying job during a period in which many Japanese people went without work, ***“The canneries became very busy in producing canned fish and energizers for wartime use. The cannery I worked for, B.C. Packers, had a cod liver oil plant at Lake Bay on Vancouver Island. After the fishing season in 1940 I got a job at that plant, there was a whole camp of Japanese working there. Later I had a job on a boat, a packer. That boat collected cod and dogfish and delivered them to Lake Bay to be made into cod liver oil and fertilizer. The company was trying to increase production rapidly, that was why I was able to get a job on a packer. Before that there were not such jobs available...”***

Sources

Knight, Rolf and Koizumi, Maya. *A Man of Our Times: the life-history of a Japanese-Canadian*

Lyons, Cicely. *Salmon: Our Heritage*. Vancouver: Mitchell Press Ltd., 1969.

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Skogan, Joan. *Skeena: A River Remembered*. Vancouver: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1983

As World War II approached, the Canadian government became increasingly concerned with the defense of the West Coast and the threat of Japanese “enemy aliens” who lived in British Columbia. In 1937 a solution was presented by the director of the Royal Canadian Naval Reserves, who suggested recruiting commercial fishermen to form a naval reserve as they already had expertise in seamanship and an intimate knowledge of B.C.'s coast.

The Gumboot Navy

Lieutenant Commander Colin Donald was appointed leader of the Fishermen's Reserve and began recruiting fishermen with unique approaches, like assuring the men that they would not be transferred offshore or forced to participate in the theatre of war. Additionally, Donald used the strong Japanese presence in the fishing industry to take advantage of the economic insecurity of other fishermen. Donald suggested that the true purpose of the reserve was to round up and suppress the Japanese living in B.C., thereby opening up more opportunities for white fishermen.

(Above) Two Navy men examine engine parts confiscated from a Japanese-Canadian fishing boat on December 10, 1941 (Library and Archives Canada)

(Background Image)
Fishermen's Reserve rounding up Japanese-Canadian fishing vessels on December 10, 1941 (Library and Archives Canada)

(Above) Members of the Fishermen's Reserve playing cards on October 13, 1941 (Library and Archives Canada)

Sources

Kier, Gregory David. “The Gumboot Navy: Securing or Sundering British Columbia.” Master's thesis, University of Victoria, 2014.

Twatio, Bill. “The Gum Boot Navy: The Fishermen's Reserve Answers the Call.” *Esprit de Corps, Canadian Military Then and Now* 11, no. 2 (2004): 19.

The “gumboot navy” converted fishing vessels into boats capable of military excursions and the white (and later First Nations) fishermen were trained by the Navy and became valued eyes and ears along the coast. After war officially broke out in 1941, the Fishermen's Reserve began rounding up Japanese living along the coast, especially Japanese fishermen. Gregory Kier highlights this problematic use of the reserve by stating that “the former fishermen of the FR could easily empathize that the loss of one's fishing boat meant the loss of one's livelihood, yet they still confiscated the Japanese fish boats.”

Ultimately the gumboot navy was an innovative approach to protecting Canada's West Coast that played an unfortunate role in identifying and removing “enemy aliens” from British Columbia. □

Japanese Internment



(Above) A Canadian Sailor attaches a Union Jack to an expropriated Japanese-Canadian fishing vessel in New Westminster on December 29, 1941. (Library and Archives Canada)

In January of 1942 the Canadian government decided on the removal of all Japanese and Canadians of Japanese descent from the coast of British Columbia. Japanese fishermen had always been key to the success of the fishing industry, but their removal from the coast to inhumane internment camps located in the interior led to a lack of manpower at the canneries and tension between Japanese and Europeans living in coastal communities.

“On the declaration of war with Japan steps were immediately taken by the federal authorities to take into custody all the fishing vessels on the British Columbia coast owned by persons of Japanese nationality or Japanese origin.” (From *The Annual Report of the Department of Fisheries for the Year 1942-43*)

Sources

Lyons, Cicely. *Salmon: Our Heritage*. Vancouver: Mitchell Press Ltd., 1969.

Twatio, Bill. “The Gum Boot Navy: The Fishermen's Reserve Answers the Call.” *Esprit de Corps, Canadian Military Then and Now* 11, no. 2 (2004): 19.

(Right) The Fisherman's reserve rounds up Japanese and Japanese-Canadian fishing boats on December 10, 1941. (Library and Archives Canada)



(Above) A Royal Canadian Navy officer questions Japanese-Canadian fishermen after he seizes their boat on December 9, 1941. (Library and Archives Canada)

“...It was a very sad affair. Most of those fellows had never seen Japan. Some were veterans of World War One and they wore their tunics when they brought their boats in, and all their badges. They had tears in their eyes.” - a coxswain from the Fisherman's Reserve

The Conversion of Canneries and Fishing Boats for the War Effort

Canada made efficient use of the fishing industry during the war, including the recruitment of a fishermen navy and the building of large halibut ships. As fishermen were sought out along the pacific coast, recruiters for the Fishermen Reserve discovered that Canadian halibut fishers were having difficulty reaching all the zones due to their small boats. The limitations of many boats put Canadian fishers at a disadvantage, especially compared to U.S. fishers. The reserve recruiters proposed a plan to the Department of National Defense, which would require the government to subsidize the cost of building larger and more powerful fishing vessels. These new boats would then be under contract with some of the newly recruited Fishermen Reserve members. The arrangement would require fishermen to cover the remaining cost, agree to attend a number of days training, and to serve with the boat when needed. This plan was eventually implemented and helped to boost the fishing industry and the boat-building industry, in addition to aiding national defense



(Above) Cannery workers and fishing boats at Steveston Cannery in 1942 (Richmond Archives)

(Right) The fishing vessel “Barkley Sound” being converted into a vessel for the Fishermen’s Reserve on May 9, 1942 (Library and Archives Canada)

(Below) Fishing boats and the Steveston Cannery in 1940 (Richmond Archives)



Sources

Blyth, Gladys. *Salmon Canneries: British Columbia North Coast*. Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1991.

Kier, Gregory David. “The Gumboot Navy: Securing or Sundering British Columbia.” Master's thesis, University of Victoria, 2014.

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In 1942 the Nelson Brothers found themselves without a cannery. During the seasons of 1940 and 1941, the Nelson Bros. Fisheries Ltd. had canned out of their new facility in Prince Rupert. But when Prince Rupert was designated a transshipping port for men and goods destined for Alaska, the United States Navy required the use of Ocean Dock in 1942, and Nelson Bros was forced to turn it over to the Americans under accordance with an agreement between the United States Secretary of War and the Canadian Government. A similar situation happened at the Port Edward Cannery where the U.S. military built a small city around the cannery to house, feed, and supply troops heading to Alaska. It was not until after the war that these sites were returned to their original owners.

The end of WWII brought back a new sense of normalcy to Canadians, especially those living and working along the coast of British Columbia. The heavy military presence felt during the war was scaled back until it was removed almost completely from places such as Prince Rupert and Port Edward. Many men who had fought overseas returned to their homes and their previous jobs working in the fisheries, displacing the many women who had taken over their positions during the war.

One of the most important events following WWII was the end of the internment for Japanese and Japanese-Canadians. However the end of internment was not a happy time for many Japanese, as they returned to their homes to find nothing in most cases. Many of their belongings, businesses, and houses were destroyed or stolen. Japanese fishermen often returned to find their boats stolen or destroyed, leaving them little opportunity to return to their previous lives.



Post War

Many Japanese and Japanese Canadians wished to return to the canneries following WWII, but faced discrimination on all fronts. It was not until 1949, four years after the end of the war, that Japanese and Japanese-Canadians steadily made their way back to the canneries along British Columbia's coast.

“Because of the internment all of our old friends are scattered. They are not here anymore. Some went back to Japan, others went east, others are scattered around B.C.”

-Ruichi Yoshida

“I was sixteen or seventeen when we moved to Tashme camp during the war. Before that we lived in Steveston. My mother and father both died at Tashme and I went back to Japan on the first boat after the war. I was twenty-one then and I stayed eight years in Japan, but I felt good coming back to Canada.”

-Tokiko Hamanishi, Port Edward Cannery

(Left) Japanese-Canadians await transportation back to the coast of British Columbia following the end of WWII and Japanese Internment in Canada. (Library and Archives Canada)
(Background Image) The North Pacific Cannery, 2017. (Taken by Brielle Lalonde)

Sources

Knight, Rolf and Koizumi, Maya. *A Man of Our Times: the life-history of a Japanese-Canadian fisherman*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1976.
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