

Professor Alex Hernandez

Good afternoon, Vic One students, members of our University of Toronto community, esteemed alumni and guests.

My name is Professor Alex Hernandez and I'm principal of Victoria College. It is my honour to welcome you all to the 2026 Steven Cxford Lecture. In just a moment, I'll be inviting Victoria University President Rhonda McEwen up to the stage to introduce our speaker.

But before doing so, I'd like to pause and acknowledge the land on which we are located. This place has been a site of human activity for thousands of years and is the territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca and the Mississaugas of the Credit. The territory was the subject of the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. Today, Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are encouraged to continually strengthen our relationships among all living beings and with this land.

President Rhonda McEwen

Good afternoon, everyone and welcome. I'm just so thrilled that you're here. I'm also thrilled that the snow came on Monday. There was a lot of trepidation about that snow, so I give thanks.

It's a real pleasure to have you here in our amazing Isabel Bader Theatre once again. It's great to see so many students and faculty, so many of our staff, some of our librarians, our friends and our donors, gathered here for the annual Cxford lecture, one of our signature moments in the Victoria University academic year. This series reflects our commitment to serious inquiry, leadership and to engaging directly with the forces shaping our world.

I want to begin by expressing our deep gratitude to Stephen Cxford and the Cxford family. I'm pleased that Steve's wife, Kathy Cxford, is here today, with two of their sons, Andrew and Peter, and Steve's sister is also here again. It's wonderful to have you here. The Cxford family generously has created a space at Victoria for conversations that matter, conversations about power, responsibility and global leadership.

The Cxford lecture doesn't simply bring distinguished speakers to our campus. It challenges us to think more deeply about the world that we inhabit, and the roles that we may one day play in shaping it. The growing legacy of this lecture series speaks for itself. The very first Cxford lecture was on the economics of climate change and was delivered by Mark Carney, who, as we all know, went on to greater things.

Last year, we were honoured to welcome Anne Applebaum, who has become, in the last year, a leading voice shaping global debates on autocracy, authoritarianism and democracy. Tonight's lecture continues that tradition. No pressure. Leadership at Victoria University is never abstract. It is grounded in our history.

It is grounded in service and responsibility. That is something I feel quite personally. Some of you know that I serve as an honorary captain in the Royal Canadian Navy, an honour that I accepted

with support from Wendy Cecil, Chancellor Emerita, Victoria University, and an extraordinary leader in her own right. Wendy is here with us today. But also, my family has a legacy in service, with my father serving as a cadet in Trinidad and Tobago, one cousin who served in the Royal Navy as a submariner and another who is a senior leader in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Why this connection? My ancestors, who were black refugees from the South who had settled in Nova Scotia after the War of 1812, faced discrimination and broken promises of land and opportunity. They made the decision to leave Halifax aboard Royal Navy-escorted ships crossing the Atlantic to Trinidad in search of freedom, dignity and safety. That history reminds me that navies are equally organizations of defense and strategy. They are also part of human stories, stories of movement, of protection, of global reach and of consequence. That perspective makes tonight's lecture especially meaningful.

It is my great honour to introduce to you our speaker, Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee, the 38th commander of the Royal Canadian Navy. Vice-Admiral Topshee brings a remarkable breadth of experience to this role. His academic background spans both military and civilian institutions on three continents. His masters of literature and strategic studies from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland included courses that some of our students here might be taking themselves, courses in history, political science, international relations and philosophy.

At sea, his career highlights include command of HMCS Algonquin and three years commanding Canada's Pacific Fleet. His shore postings reflect deep strategic leadership, including two tours in Navy strategy, three years as commander of Canadian Forces Base Halifax, two years as Deputy Director of Strategy, Policy and Plans at NORAD and United States Northern Command in Colorado Springs. In 2011, he deployed to Afghanistan as director of Afghan National Police Training within the NATO Training Mission of Afghanistan.

Throughout his career, Vice-Admiral Topshee has been engaged with the Arctic at nearly every shore posting. One of the things I've always enjoyed about being in the Navy is that we say coast to coast to coast. Vice-Admiral Topshee is increasingly central to Canada's strategy, sovereignty and global responsibilities. Before assuming command of the Royal Canadian Navy in May of 2022, he had the honour of commanding Marine Time Forces Pacific and Joint Task Force Pacific in Esquimalt, British Columbia.

At Victoria University, and particularly through programs like our Vic One, we strive to prepare students to think critically about leadership in complex, uncertain and quite novel times. -- environments much like those Vice-Admiral Topshee has navigated throughout his career. His experience speaks directly to the kind of global, ethical and strategic questions we ask our students to engage with every day.

We are honoured to welcome a leader whose service spans oceans, alliances and institutions and focuses on some of the most pressing geopolitical challenges of our time. Please join me in welcoming Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee, commander of the Royal Canadian Navy.

Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee

Thanks very much, Rhonda. In comparison to the first two speakers, I will admit to feeling particularly inadequate at the moment. I want to begin by thanking Stephen Coxford for the generous donation that supports this lecture, and it was a pleasure to meet with Kathy and the rest of the Coxford family. I really think it's important to have opportunities to gather and to discuss big, important issues, especially at such an interesting and challenging time.

My goal today is really to provide a bit of a context, from a nautical perspective, on where Canada finds itself right now. We are in an interesting moment, and it is reminding us of some things that I think the last 80 years allowed us to pretend: that maybe the world wasn't directed and dictated by great power, politics and national interests, and that it could be a better place. Unfortunately, I think we're seeing that the rules-based order that we've come to count on isn't the same any longer. And so today, I'm going to challenge a few other preconceived notions and ideas that we might have, and I look forward to making sure there's some time for questions at the end. And I'm particularly interested to hear the perspectives of the Vic One students.

And so, we often say, you know, Canada is surrounded by three oceans. Those oceans have defended us. We feel very secure in our North American waters, or at least we have for years. But obviously oceans only protect you with navies that serve to defend them. ...

There's a lot of uncertainty in the world, and I think it was brilliantly summed up by Prime Minister Carney in his speech in Davos. And you see on the slide two of the big things that we took away from that; the recognition that this is a world in which power matters.

Hard power matters. And I'll touch a bit on how Canada has used that in its past to become a force for good. In the first slide I showed you about the need for why Canada needs the Navy.

This was the photo underneath them. It's a part of our history that I think most people have forgotten. It's the story of Frederic Rolette, a young lieutenant in the Provincial Marine and veteran of the Royal Navy, but a Canadian, a francophone, a colonial. And the fact that he was made an officer in the Provincial Marine by the British is a sign of the quality of him as a mariner and a leader.

More importantly to us, in the early days of the War of 1812, he led a small boat aboard the Cuyahoga Packet. With only six people, he leapt on board the Cuyahoga Packet and yelled "surrender or die!". And the Americans surrendered! There were about 60 of them onboard the Cuyahoga Packet and they were armed with swords and muskets.

Rolette quickly got everyone below decks, locked them up and before they realized how few Canadians there were, he sailed the ship back to Canadian waters. It happened that this aborted the plans for the invasion of Canada by the Americans, which was instrumental to our early defense. So, we're ready if we have to be to defend ourselves against all odds.

There are some other moments in our history that are interesting. U-boats came to Canadian shores. That's a picture of a spy who was dropped ashore. Fortunately, because he came on a submarine, he stank of diesel fumes so badly that when he tried to check into a hotel, they called the police and said there's something not quite right with this person. These are funny stories. The harsh reality, though, is that U-boats actually sank a lot of Canadian ships far up the St. Lawrence River, beyond Rimouski. They sank all these ships, including the Caribou, the ferry between Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

They killed more Canadians in our waters in the Gulf of St. Lawrence than died on the beaches of Juneau on the 6th of June 1944. And I'm sure most Canadians don't appreciate that and don't understand that fact. In fact, the war came to Canada. We think of the Second World War as a war that was over there.

But for the Navy, the war was very much in our waters. The last Royal Canadian Navy ship to be sunk in battle was HMCS Esquimalt on the 16th of April 1945, within just weeks of the end of the war. Half the ship's company died as the war was just about to end, and they died within sight of their home port of Halifax.

So what is there with this myth that Canadians are peacekeepers? You know that we view our job in history and the thing we are most proud of is the fact that we stand between warring armies and keep the peace. We're peacekeepers. Well, I have a different perspective on that. I actually believe that we are warriors who win wars. We talk a lot about Vimy Ridge as a defining moment for Canada.

Vimy Ridge was a tremendous tactical achievement. Strategically, it made no difference to the outcome of the war. But the last hundred days in August, September, October of 1918 were decisive in winning the First World War, and that advance was led by the Canadian Army, pioneering a whole host of tactics that broke the back of the German resistance and had General Ludendorff, the commander of the German Army, declare the 6th of August as the darkest day in German military history. The day they were defeated by a force led by the Canadian Army, and we carried on in this way in the Second World War.

I think if you were to ask people today, outside Canada, around the world to name the three armies that landed troops at Normandy, most people would not know that Canada was there. That we had our own beach; that we provided a quarter of the ships that put that force ashore; that it was our air force patrolling the skies. Canada was a major power, and we were the liberators of Holland.

You know, we forget the amount of power that we were able to generate in those wars. In fact, more than 10 per cent of Canadians put on the uniform-- one of the highest percentages of any country that was not actually invaded. And yet in both the First and Second World War, our history is the ability to use hard power and to win wars when we need to, and then afterwards we talk. This is where the story of Canadians as peacekeepers begins.

Lester B. Pearson, the Suez Crisis in 1956, the last gasp of the British and French empires trying to assert their force by seizing the Suez Canal, driving autocracies in the early days of the Cold War. Canada was recognized as a powerful country, and we had the diplomatic weight as a result to be

able to propose a solution, to interpose a peacekeeping force, to allow the warring factions to retreat peacefully and to stabilize the situation. We, because of our sacrifices and because of the recognition of the power we brought to the Second World War, were able to negotiate and achieve that. And then we had an army that could do the job and a Navy that could get it there.

This is a picture of HMCS Magnificent, our aircraft carrier, at the time carrying the Canadian Army to Suez in January of 1957 to put that peacekeeping force ashore. And so, this is where our history as peacekeepers comes from. It's not built upon this idea that we are just good people who can talk people out of fighting. It's because we were recognized as warriors, and because we had the diplomatic and military weight to be able to bring real power behind those efforts.

And it went on. You know, there's a later time, probably an interesting period of time when peacekeeping was an awful lot like war-making. As we tried to resolve a very difficult situation following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the post-Cold War Europe, the peacekeeping force that we put there. And let's be clear, we fought the Battle of Medak Pocket and it was a true fight.

And we are incredibly fortunate that we lost no Canadians there. Though the Croatian Army certainly lost a lot of their soldiers. The reason we had the power to do this was because the army that we had built up and stationed in Germany was a powerful force, and it still had the hard power to be able to deploy to Kosovo, to Croatia, to Herzegovina and also at the same time to Rwanda.

We had a large and powerful military that had been a legacy of the Cold War. But in the 30 years since that time, we've underinvested in the Canadian Armed Forces. But I don't want that to sound like a criticism of the politicians, because from a strict, utilitarian point of view, we probably made exactly the right choices over the last 30 years of not investing in the military when the world order was stable and protective, and those investments were better placed in other areas. And so, we've dug ourselves a pretty deep hole, but there's a good reason why we did that.

And if you look at public sentiment across those years, most Canadians felt that we were living in a reasonably stable and secure world. We had confidence in the world order. And so, we stopped investing in the hard power that had benefited us for so many years. And we're at a point now where I think we've recognized we need to make that investment anew.

The government has made a commitment to effectively triple the defense budget, going from well below the 2 per cent NATO standard to achieving 2 per cent by the end of this fiscal year, 3.5 per cent by the end of the decade and 5 per cent of total spending on defense, including 1.5 per cent on defense-related infrastructure. That's a massive investment in defense. And I think it is, as we look at the world order of today, probably warranted to make sure that when push comes to shove, we can defend our bridges, defend our waters, defend our values and defend our people.

We're talking about nation-building projects now. It seems sometimes as though these are impossible ideas, Certainly we've been talking about high-speed rail for forever, and maybe someday we'll get there. But honestly, the St. Lawrence Seaway was once that same sort of idea, from an engineering point of view, and from a complexity point of view given its length as it's a longer and more complicated project than either the Suez Canal or the Panama Canal. And now we take it for granted.

Something that was opened in the 1950s is now absolutely critical to what we do, but we don't see it as one of those great national projects because it's just there. I think as we look to these things, I don't think we should focus on the challenge and expense of these things today but look to the outcome down the road. Within a generation or two, we just take them for granted and they are sources of national power for us.

So, why does the St. Lawrence Seaway matter? Well, for most Canadians, this is our perception of Toronto. Now it's a beautiful skyline, unmistakable in the world. With the CN tower there. Though for me as a naval officer, when I look at that skyline, I see a seaport.

That ship in the harbour can go all the way to Egypt. Toronto is a seaport. You have a port authority right down on the waterfront, which most people probably recognize as the place where there's a great steak restaurant. But it's a port.

And it's a great port. 2.3 million tons of stuff came through the port of Toronto in the last year. Canada is a maritime nation and an economic powerhouse here and everywhere. We depend on the oceans for trade and for prosperity. In fact, the greatest increase in human prosperity has been over the last 80 years. I would argue that that's because of two things. The first is the freedom of the seas that's been afforded to everybody because we've had a largely peaceful time; there have been no great conflicts that have prevented countries from moving goods across the seas.

And the second thing is the invention of the shipping container that has allowed the easy movement of goods and the quick transition from sea to road or to rail to get those goods to consumers. That has, like I said, been responsible for the single greatest increase in human prosperity over time. And so, to protect that, we'll talk a bit about what enables that on the seas. And it's a Navy.

We've had our little moments in Canadian naval history, like the start of the Second World War. We were a force of just a handful of ships and a few thousand sailors, but we grew in just six years to be the third largest navy in the world, with nearly 100,000 men and women in uniform, 17,000 of whom were recruited right here in Toronto. The largest ever recruiting effort for the Navy was here in this great port city of Toronto. Now, today, we're not quite as big as we used to be.

The 35 ships that you see here are not all combatants. It's a mix of capabilities, some of which are small training vessels. The force we need needs to include about 35 actual surface combatants and submarines. I'll talk a bit more about what our plans are to get there.

But first, geography. We have the longest coastline in the world, nearly a quarter of a million kilometers. If you think about the distance to drive across Canada, a drive that I've done in the Navy a couple of times, all the way from Victoria to Halifax, 6,000 kilometres, you get 12 days to do that drive as you get relocated from one of our naval bases to the other-- driving at 100 kilometres an hour, it's a reasonable five or six hours a day. Of course, we can't actually maintain that pace across the entire country.

But if you think about it, 12 days just to drive 6,000 kms coast to coast, how long does it take to patrol a quarter million kilometers? And to do that continuously? Canadians rightly expect that we know everything that's happening on and under our waters.

We're striving to do that right now. It's not as good as it should be, but some pretty strong investments have been made. First and foremost is NORAD modernization. NORAD has a maritime warning mission to detect threats coming by sea to North America.

And the government's invested billions of dollars in modernizing all of those systems to detect everything that might be approaching North America from the surface of the sea up to space. That's a huge part of this effort. We've got the Coast Guard being given a surveillance mandate for the first time in its history, being brought under the Department of National Defense and charged with the job of knowing what's happening on and in our waters at all times. We work closely with them in the Navy; there are three maritime security operation centres across Canada that we work in jointly, including one in Niagara on the Great Lakes, monitoring what I call Canada's fourth maritime boundary, the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway.

We're also deploying all sorts of remotely controlled systems, seabed sensors, technology of all sorts to get after solving this problem. And part of the vision is actually not just looking for submarines in our waters but also adding to our knowledge. I met last week with the Hydrographer General of Canada talking about how we can make sure that, as we invest in technology designed to detect threats to North America in our waters, we are also adding to our scientific knowledge and surveying our waters properly to make sure that we can use them effectively and safely for our benefit. All of these things have to serve both a military purpose and I think a civilian and economic purpose.

In the Navy, we're very serious about getting after uncrewed systems to enable that effort. You know, if we're going to patrol our waters continuously, it's best not to have to have people in all of those platforms, especially up in the high Arctic and other places where it's difficult to sustain people. So we've got an advanced naval capabilities unit that has been created on the West Coast that is getting after not just all of the tricks to surveil all of our waters, but learning all of the lessons of the Ukrainian conflict to make sure that not only can we see what's happening in our waters, but also we can react to it if we need to. In fact, that's the next big challenge: to figure out once we know what's happening on and under the waters, what systems we need to be able to make sure that the information reaches the government and they can decide how we should react.

And that reaction comes from across the Canadian Armed Forces, not just the Navy, but also the Air Force, the Army, our cyber force, and our special operating forces as well. It's a whole government military response. Understandably, I'm only going to focus on the Navy right now. And it begins for us with the Halifax-class frigates. We have 12 of these ships, which are among the best ASW (anti-submarine warfare) ships in the world, built in the 1990s.

The 1990s were the last great shipbuilding moment for Canada when we modernized our fleet. These ships are still capable and still fit for purpose. They were designed to last 30 years and it's been 30 years. We're going to figure out how to keep them going for another 15 years.

The good news is the task they might have to do to defend Canada is the task they were designed to do and remain capable of doing. Because we've kept investing in this capability, and the government has given us more money to make sure they can keep going. The Canadian CP-140

aircraft is a great example of Canadian technology. That's the American P-3 aircraft that just about every Navy in the world used as their maritime patrol aircraft.

But we've worked over the years to make sure it has a Canadian mission system that is more advanced than any other mission system out there, with one possible exception on the P-8 Poseidon, the new American aircraft, which also happens to be the one we're buying to replace it. So, we've got a great capability in terms of maritime air, and we're investing heavily in uncrewed air aerial systems and all of that to augment things. The future of aviation is unproven, but the transition will probably take more than the next generation. So, there'll be a mix of things as we go.

The future, from a surface combat point of view, is the River-class destroyer, probably the most capable anti-submarine warfare ship in design right now. The British are accepting delivery of the first one of these. The Australians have got it designed in Norway and have also bought this. Our version is called the River-class destroyer and is exactly what we've always needed in Canada: a true destroyer capable of every part of naval warfare, including being optimized to hunt submarines, because the most likely threat from the sea to North America comes from missiles launched from submarines close to our shore, and our job is to make sure they never get close enough to be able to do that.

The other thing that has been in the news a lot is submarines. If you want to guarantee that no one comes into your water without your permission, a submarine is what you need.

There is no more capable platform in the in the Navy than a submarine to deny someone the use of your waters. And we're now in a world where we need to have that capability. If we want to have the say over who comes into our waters and what they can do while they're here, we need subs. For the first time in our history, we're actually looking at buying submarines to defeat things coming into our waters and to control and own our waters, Submarines were always things that we acquired to train our own surface forces on how to defeat submarines. We never really intended to use them as true submarines. Twelve is the number we need to defend all of our ocean approaches because Canada has a big, complicated geography.

But this is exactly the submarine we need. And what's exciting is-- if you doubt our government's desire to move quickly-- I don't think there's a procurement in recent years, and in the last 30 or 40 years for sure, that has moved as quickly as this one. The government appears committed to making a decision on the right submarine for Canada by this summer. So, we are moving fast.

We've also recognized that we need to be up in the Arctic. The Harry DeWolf-class of Arctic and Offshore Patrol vessels are icebreakers. Another fact that most people don't realize is that Canada has the second largest fleet of icebreakers in the world, and one of the great capabilities for icebreaking. These ships are fantastic! They can easily break a meter and a half of ice.

They can go anywhere in the Canadian Arctic in the summer navigation season and anywhere around the Arctic throughout the year. In fact, there's one operating off the coast of Greenland right now as part of the routine winter training that we do. We're also looking at purchasing something that brings the fight to the ice edge. The Harry DeWolf-class Arctic and Offshore patrol vessels only have a small cut on board.

They're really built to patrol into the Arctic, and from a sovereignty point of view, if we need to fight to defend ourselves, we need a ship that can go into the Ice edge. The River-class destroyer is a great ship, but it has very thin hulls like all the other surface combatants. It's designed for speed and capability in the open ocean, and some of its steel is as thin as four millimeters. The Corvette is designed to be able to go right up to the ice edge, to operate anywhere in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence throughout the year.

The Corvette is designed to have about the same fight as the Halifax class. And I'll show you a slide that tries to put together all these different capabilities; how you make up a navy of these different things, because each of these ships brings a different capability. These ones, for example, being built right now in Vancouver are tankers that refuel ships at sea. Because if you're out there trying to patrol for submarines off the coast of Canada, it's about seven days to leave the station and make sure you get to the submarine before it gets to missile release range.

Seven days to get back into harbour and to get back out to the station. It's a whole lot easier if the fuel comes to you. And so that's what these ships are designed to do, to bring fuel and ammunition to the fleet, wherever the fleet operates. And then when you put it all together, you get this map.

You know, as you look at this, the circles of influence around each of the ships show what they can influence in a 24-hour period. So, the Continental Defence Corvette, in red. That's what it can patrol from a surface and air point of view and hunt for submarines. The River-class destroyer is in blue. The darker blue circle is surface and submarines.

The lighter blue circle is the destroyer's air influence that it can control, because it will have radars that can see all the way from the surface to the edge of space. And as you can see now, a couple of River-class destroyers can protect the entire coast and the Atlantic and the Pacific from air threats. And so you try and make sure that the fleet has a mix of capabilities; ships that can protect others, the River class are out there, the Corvette in the numbers that you need to make sure you cover Canada's entire quarter-million mile boundary;, submarines to prevent others going through critical chokepoints, and supply ships to keep the fleet fueled and at sea.

But geography is a challenge, because when you look at the Arctic, we forget how far it is from us, from Ottawa up to Alert, to the permanently manned Canadian Forces station we have on the northern tip of Ellesmere Island. It's a heck of a long way. It's farther to get there than it is to cross Canada.

And in fact, Alert is closer to Moscow than it is to Ottawa. From a naval point of view, if you sail out of Halifax Harbour, it's a shorter trip to cross the entire Atlantic and sail to Portsmouth, England, than it is to get up to the northern tip of Baffin Island. And likewise, from Esquimalt, our West Coast base. Tokyo is closer than Iqaluit.

And the other challenge is that there's very little up there with about 140,000 people in the Canadian Arctic. And yes, there's a lot less ice in the summer. But when you look at the maximum ice extent in February and March, it hasn't significantly diminished.

It's thinner, it disappears more quickly, but it still goes almost as far at the height of winter, and it's still cold and dark and miserable at this time of year. And all the ports in the North American Arctic

freeze in winter, with one exception: Nuuk in Greenland, the most northerly port on our east coast, is free from ice year-round. We also have St. John's, Newfoundland, on the west coast,

Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Neither of those are Arctic ports, but that's as close as we get to the Americans. The challenge of the North is how do you sustain efforts up there? There's a lot of talk about investing in infrastructure in the North, and we absolutely should do that. But we need to make smart investments because building anything in the North is difficult and extremely expensive. And if it doesn't serve multiple purposes, you're probably wasting your money.

You want to make sure that you know every bit of infrastructure investment serves as many purposes as it possibly can; that it supports the people; that it enables sustainable development; and that it serves to strengthen our sovereignty and security. And to that end, we're finding ways to rubberize or pave the runways in the north. But for ports, it might be easier to actually bring the port to the North. And this slide shows what you get if you ask artificial intelligence to develop a picture of an Arctic capable amphibious ship.

None of us have any idea what the giant hole in the middle of the ship is for!. But the concept is a Polar-class ship and so heavy an icebreaker that it has the capacity to be an amphibious ship. The definition of an amphibious ship is that it is able to deliver capability, whether that's troops or supplies or government of Canada aid, from sea to shore without any prepared port infrastructure. And that perfectly describes our North, because even in Iqaluit, the largest community in the Arctic Archipelago, there is a port open in the summer, but the tides are ten meters high, almost as big as the Bay of Fundy.

So, as a port goes, it's as good as it can be, which is not great up in the Arctic. A ship that doesn't depend on port infrastructure to deliver capability is what we need. Imagine a small community in distress at exactly this time of year up in the High North. The ability to deploy a capability that can break the ice to get there and then actually deliver, by helicopter, whatever is needed to address the security situation, or to rescue a community or deal with a concern of any type, would be exactly what we want to do. This is effectively an Arctic mobile base, and we think that's probably part of the solution for Canada in this difficult, challenging moment.

And harkening back to the Suez crisis for a moment, with the idea of being able to take the army to a part of the world where we might want them to intervene in something, this kind of capability would also enable that. And the interesting thing about the Navy is that if you build a Navy that can defend Canada and serve all our needs, it will be a really powerful and effective Navy to exert influence elsewhere in the world. And you'll see on the slide, as Prime Minister Carney said, "if you aren't at the table, you're on the menu." Well, we want to be at the table around the world.

And so, this is where the Royal Canadian Navy has deployed in the last year or two. We're a small navy, but we deploy and influence globally. And so how do you build on that? Well, the challenge is you need to build the ships.

Our history again tells us we can do this—we've built ships before. We built 123 Corvettes in Canada, so basically a force that is almost four times the size of the current Navy. And just in Corvettes. In fact, we've even built ships here in Toronto.

These are the beaches in Toronto. We've built 17 ships there. That's a picture of a Toronto shipyard that did not exist before the Second World War and didn't exist for very long after it either. But we had the capacity to do this, to turn our country into an engine, to create the capabilities we needed.

And we can do it again. They're probably not all military capabilities this time, but the major projects that we talk about, the investments we need to make in building our economy, strengthening our prosperity, strengthening our ability to exert influence in the world are all things that we have done in our history. We forget parts of our history as well. The Royal Canadian Navy operated aircraft carriers into the 1970s.

In fact, I'm sure that the vast majority of Canadians would not be able to answer this question on a trivia test about the Navy. Every one of the ships in this picture, except for the aircraft carrier, was built in Canada. We built a great navy, and we pioneered all the innovations we use in anti-submarine warfare. Today, in all navies around the world.

These were Canadian inventions and we were the best in the world at it, and we're still good. But we need to get back to being the best again. And so, the good news is the government has invested in a national shipbuilding strategy. They are committed to building ships here in Canada and in the Halifax yard.

We have arguably at Irving, the best shipyard in North America. We're solving other issues. This is the fleet maintenance facility. It employs the largest blue-collar workforce in the government of Canada.

We also need technicians who can deploy around the world to support capability wherever it may be needed. And we're growing the people we need. Yes, we're short one out of every four sailors that we need. But right now, with the new Naval experience program, the one-year recruiting program that we've got, is a source of a third of all the recruits into the Navy and our sailors are trained for their effective strength.

The number of sailors trained and ready to work is growing again. We'll get back to health. We'll train the force that we need. We've got a great footprint on either coast, but more importantly, 24 Naval Reserve divisions across Canada.

Capacity and capability to do what we've always done to attract, recruit and train Canadians into the Royal Canadian Navy is a priority. This is how we grew from a very small force to the third largest Navy in the world. By recruiting through the Naval Reserve divisions, including ones like HMCS York, right here in Toronto, we can be strong again. This is the key.

Our challenge is to figure out how we get more Canadians into uniform quickly through the Naval Reserve divisions, train them close to where they come from, and then enable them with a fleet of training vessels, including basing, 20 or more of these training vessels in the Great Lakes and along the St. Lawrence Seaway so that we can patrol that fourth maritime boundary. At the same time, we need to train our sailors and accelerate their progress to lead and command our naval forces into the future. So, it's a great vision for a Navy. And it's about having the hard power right now that we need so that if we have to, we are ready to fight.

And what I can assure you is that everyone who wears this uniform recognizes that burden and is prepared to undertake it in this moment. It is a difficult, dangerous time. We hope that our services as maritime warriors are never going to be required in active combat. But if they are, we'll be ready and we've got a plan to figure out how we will make do with what we have and build what we must to protect Canadian interests, defend Canadians and make sure that no one comes into our waters without our permission.

I promised that I would not do a recruiting pitch in all of this, but being in the Navy is a pretty good life! I will simply note that the value proposition of a Navy has always been to see the world.

We've got sailors who went to Antarctica on one of our ships last year. We're sending them there again this year. We visit every continent, every sea, every ocean, every part of the world. Our sailors do this in the comfort of their own ships; they don't have to live in a trench like the Army!

And so, with that, I think it's time for questions. I'm happy to take whatever you might want to throw at me.

Professor Ira Wells

My name is Professor Ira Wells and I serve as academic programs director here at Victoria College. It will be my pleasure to formally thank Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee for his address. But first, we do have time for a few questions.

The question is about the port of Churchill, it's been in the news a lot. What are your insights?

Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee

We had a naval base in Churchill up until 1968. In fact, we had sailors stationed there. I think Churchill has a lot of potential because the season that the port is open aligns really well with the grain season.

Shipping grain out of Churchill; the problem is winter. To sustain Churchill as an avenue through the winter navigation season, you need a very large fleet of icebreakers to keep that route open, which might be worthwhile, but we'd want to really take a close look at the business case for that. And I know the premier of Manitoba is very excited about making that business case and investing in the rail connection to Churchill.

Another challenge with Churchill is it's actually a fairly shallow port and it needs a lot of work as a naval base. I would argue it's about seven days from relevance, meaning a ship based in Churchill would have to sail for seven days to get to our maritime boundary, where we probably want to stop anything coming into our waters.

But should we have more ports?

If you look at the history of where submarines attacked us in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, we might want to look at something in that area that makes sure we have a backstop along the St. Lawrence Seaway, which is a vital economic corridor for Canada. I think Churchill has a tremendous potential as a port, not as a naval base. And it will always struggle with winter.

The question is about military procurement, the strategy and the ability to implement.

I think the submarine procurement is a sign that we can do things faster. One of the keys is that we need to decide on the requirement quickly and stick to that. And in the past, because we had such a sclerotic procurement system, which was designed really not to spend money, we really worked hard to get every conceivable thing we might ever need into any new procurement. And so, we really worked hard to get the requirement perfect.

We're focused right now on minimum viable capability. So, when we talk about the Corvette, I'm looking to deliver what is good enough for now, knowing that over the 30-year lifespan of that ship, it will evolve and improve. And let's not try and figure out what the 30-year thing is. Let's get the thing we need now and focus on that.

The government, with the Defense Investment Agency, I think is committed to trying to do procurement well. I'll give you another example, the Canadian modular assault rifle. We need new rifles for the military. Colt Canada makes them right here in Canada.

It's a good rifle. And so, we didn't waste time trying to figure out how to do a big competition. We just said, how many do we need? Can you build us that number?

I do have confidence actually, that we can get to where we need to get to in procurement, but it absolutely begins by us in uniform, looking in the mirror and making sure we're only seeking the minimum viable capability.

The question is about our area of greatest vulnerability.

For me right now, it's actually the West Coast. The most important harbor in Canada is the Port of Vancouver. It's head and shoulders above every other port in terms of total export volume, both by quantity and by value. Prince Rupert is No. 2, with apologies to Montreal. There's a lot of attention in NATO about the Greenland, Iceland, the U.K. gap and detecting Russian submarines coming through that area.

There are chokepoints that allow us to understand when threats are coming into the Atlantic. Relative to the Pacific, it's a tiny little pond. The Pacific is a vast ocean. To travel from Halifax to Portsmouth, England, is the same distance as from Victoria, British Columbia, to Hawaii. And in Hawaii, you're a third of the way across the Pacific Ocean, and there are no natural chokepoints in the Pacific. So, submarines from both China and Russia could operate freely in that area [and it would be] very difficult to detect them and [they could] threaten commerce along the entire West coast.

So that's why Vancouver is a more complicated one and a more valuable target. The Arctic is very, very difficult to patrol and monitor, but there is also very little to attack up there. From a military value point of view, there's not a lot of value to attacking the North. Which is why, while it's challenging to defend, the most likely enemy target would be on the West Coast.

The question is about Greenland. ... Fun fact, Mackenzie King actually thought about invading Greenland in the Second World War. For the same reason that the U.S. actually took it over in the Second World War. When Denmark fell to the Germans, Greenland was a vulnerability. And it's

essential to the defense of North America. Other interesting fact is that we share a land border with two countries, the U.S. and Denmark, over Hans Island. So, does Greenland matter?

Absolutely. . . Like I said, Nuuk is the only ice-free port in the North American Arctic. And the best thing about resolving the silly dispute over Hans Island was the fact that we can now go pull into Nuuk and use that as a port. The Danes are really happy to have us there. And so, I see a close partnership between us and the Danish navy and the Greenlanders.

In terms of operating from and patrolling around Greenland, we have a great interest in making sure that there are no threats to Greenland, because a threat to Greenland is a threat to the Canadian Arctic. I would say that there's recognition that an actual conflict over Greenland would be a pretty stupid thing. So, I'm pretty confident at this point. Well, as confident as one can be in this day and age. |

Professor Ira Wells

With that, let me officially thank the Coxford, family and Steve Coxford, once again for the visionary gift to make this happen. And let me thank Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee for delivering our 2026 Coxford lecture. This afternoon, the vice-admiral has reminded us that Canadian sovereignty is not an abstract concept, but a living responsibility, one shaped daily by leadership, vigilance and cooperation, at home and abroad.

His reflections on defense leadership, maritime history and international engagement, underscore the challenges. But I think also the opportunities, particularly the importance of partnerships, readiness and long-term vision in protecting our sovereignty. Now and in the future. I was certainly struck by how much I did not know about our own history.

And maybe, some of you felt the same way. The fact that German U-boats were sinking ships in the St. Lawrence, for example. Or the engineering triumph of the St. Lawrence Seaway. These are stories that we perhaps don't tell as much as we should.

So, thank you for telling them this afternoon. We're sincerely grateful to Vice-Admiral Topshee for sharing his experience and insights with us this afternoon, for explaining the role that maritime security plays in safeguarding Canada's interests, our values, our relationships in an increasingly complex global environment. So, on behalf of everyone here, thank you for your leadership. Thank you for your service and for the compelling and thought-provoking presentation this afternoon.