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Another August 9th – Onagawa and Robert Hampton Gray

Introduction

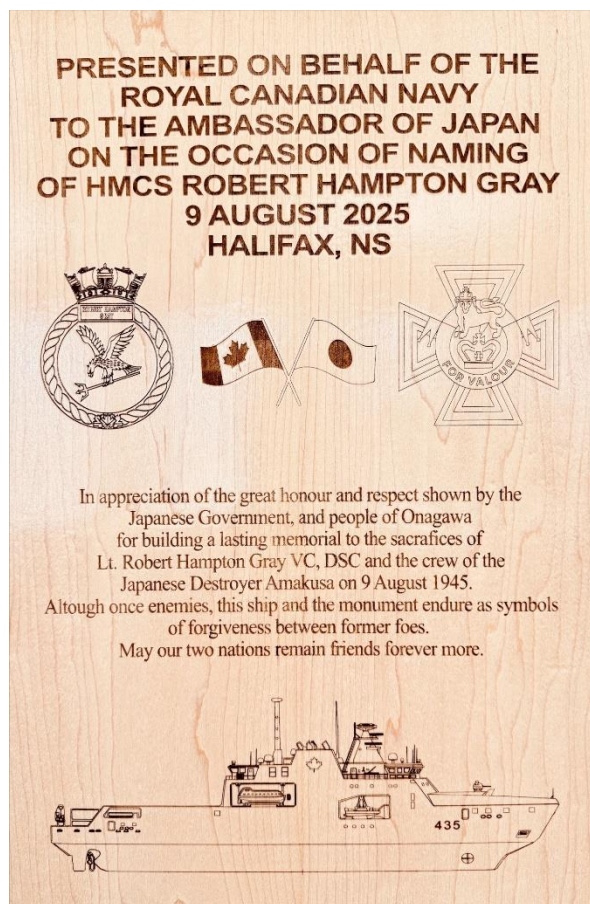
Hello to everyone at the Canada-Japan Society and everyone who supports Canada-Japan relations.

August is the height of summer vacation. This year, there were days in Ottawa where the temperature exceeded 35°C, making us realize the effects of global warming. At the same time, August brings with it more opportunities to reflect on war and peace. This year in particular marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. This is special. There is also a related exhibit at the Canadian War Museum. In addition, ceremonies were held in the National Capital Region cities of Ottawa and Gatineau on August 6th and 9th to commemorate the victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and to pray for peace.

I apologize for talking about my personal matters, but as someone from Nagasaki Prefecture, 11:02 a.m. on August 9th has been special to me ever since I was old enough to understand things. I vividly remember visiting Nagasaki Peace Park and the Nagasaki National Peace Memorial Hall as part of a social studies class in the third grade of elementary school. Among the mementos are a bent grandfather clock that stopped at 11:02, photographs of Nagasaki immediately after the atomic bomb was dropped, and photographs of the victims. I was so scared that night that I couldn't fall asleep.

With that in mind, I received an invitation from Halifax. It said that on August 9th, a naming ceremony for the Royal Canadian Navy's new Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ship (AOPS) would be held, and that they would like to respectfully invite the Japanese Ambassador to Canada to attend. The ship's name would be HMCS Robert Hampton Gray. Incidentally, as will be discussed later, Lieutenant Gray holds a special place in the Canadian Navy and in Japan-Canada relations. Halifax is also home to the Royal Canadian Navy and Irving Shipbuilding Inc, which built the patrol ship.

So, in this issue of Ottawa News, I would like to write about the progress of Japan-Canada relations as reflected in HMCS Robert Hampton Gray.



Commemorative Plaque for the Naming Ceremony

Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray

As mentioned in the 21st issue of the Ottawa News (January 2024), Robert Hampton Gray was a Lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve and a naval aviator who was killed in action during the Allied air raid and naval battle of Onagawa Bay, off the Oshika Peninsula in Miyagi Prefecture (hereinafter referred to as the "Onagawa Air Raid") on August 9, 1945, towards the end of World War II. He was 27 years old. He is believed to be the last Canadian soldier killed in action during World War II. He was a soldier who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross (VC) for acts of bravery. In fact, Lieutenant Gray remains to this day the only recipient of the VC medal in the history of the Royal Canadian Navy.

Looking back at Canada's history, since the French and Indian War, it has been involved in wars at various junctures, and as a result has developed from a colony of France and the British Empire into the sovereign nation known as Canada. Located in the northeast corner of Confederation Square in the heart of the capital, Ottawa, the Valiants Memorial houses busts of 14 heroes involved in Canada's wars. Lieutenant Gray is one of those heroes.



Lieutenant (Lt) Robert Hampton Gray

On the other hand, Lieutenant Gray is also a Canadian who symbolizes the development of postwar Japan-Canada relations. However, to be quite frank, Lieutenant Gray's name and its significance are hardly known in Japan. Nevertheless, the coordination and cooperation among those involved in the erection of the memorial in Onagawa, where he died, is also a story of friendship between Japan and Canada. For details, please refer to the 21st edition of this series, but I will provide an overview here. In the "Onagawa Air Raid" in August 1945, Lieutenant Gray was the only Allied casualty, while more than 200 Japanese, including civilians, were killed. After the war, time passed and relations between Japan and Canada developed. In 1989, when it was announced that Canada wanted to erect a memorial for Lieutenant Gray in Onagawa, the local community overwhelmingly opposed the idea, arguing that it would be difficult to accept a memorial for the "enemy" who had taken the lives of their families. There, Mr. Kanda Yoshio, a former member of the Onagawa Defense Force who ran a local clothing store, called on people to overcome past grudges. The people involved were conflicted, but ultimately accepted it. Yesterday's enemies became today's friends.

Therefore, the naming ceremony for this Arctic and offshore patrol ship was planned to commemorate the anniversary of Lieutenant Gray's death (August 9, 1945). Furthermore, given his significance in Japan-Canada relations, I was also invited as the Japanese Ambassador to Canada.

I had a hard time deciding whether to take part. Should I attend the Ottawa-Gatineau ceremony for the Nagasaki atomic bombing on August 9th, which marks the 80th anniversary this year, or the naming ceremony in Halifax? I thought, if only I had two bodies. In the end, I made a two-day, one-night business trip to Halifax and attended the naming ceremony.

National Shipbuilding Strategy and Arctic Mission

First, let's start with the history of the patrol ship HMCS Robert Hampton Gray (hereinafter referred to as "R.H. Gray"), the star of this naming ceremony. HMCS stands for His Majesty's Canadian Ship, the official prefix for ships belonging to the Royal Canadian Navy, reflecting the fact that Canada is a constitutional monarchy.

The R.H. Gray is the Royal Canadian Navy's Harry DeWolf-class, state-of-the-art Arctic and offshore patrol vessel, and is the sixth of six being built. It is 103 meters long, displaces approximately 6,600 tons when fully loaded, has a maximum speed of 17 knots (approximately 31 km/h), and has a range of 6,800 nautical miles (approximately 12,600 km). The standard crew size is 65, with the ability to accommodate an additional 40 crew members depending on the mission.

Its main missions include maintaining sovereignty in Arctic waters, patrolling territorial waters, responding to disasters, monitoring fisheries, conducting search and rescue, and supporting NATO and international missions. Therefore, the ability and functionality to cope with the harsh environment of the Arctic is important. I heard that the ship has icebreaking capabilities, allowing it to continuously break through two meters of one-year ice at three knots. It is also designed for deployment and long-term stays in the Arctic, with an insulated structure and powerful heating and ventilation systems, allowing it to operate independently for 120 days without resupply in the Arctic. Additionally, it has a large flight deck and hangar, and can carry a CH-148 Cyclone anti-submarine patrol helicopter or a CH-149 Cormorant rescue helicopter. In addition, the ship is equipped with two high-speed work boats, allowing it to carry out search and rescue operations at the edge of the sea ice. It can carry out missions in the Arctic.

Plans to build six state-of-the-art patrol vessels, including the R.H. Gray, were announced in 2011, with construction, now completed, beginning in 2018. This plan is based on the Canadian government's National Shipbuilding

Strategy and is based on a long-term perspective of supporting both defense capabilities and industrial base through the renewal of naval vessels.

Naming Ceremony

The naming ceremony took place at 11:00 a.m. on August 9, 2025, at the Royal Canadian Navy Base in Halifax, under clear, sunny skies. At the start of the ceremony, the Commander of the Navy and the President of Irving Shipbuilding officially opened the naming ceremony for the sixth Arctic patrol ship, HMCS Robert Hampton Gray.

Given the current international situation, operations in the Arctic are one of the most important missions for the Royal Canadian Navy, as outlined in the latest national defence strategy, "Our North, Strong and Free," published in 2024. I realized that naming the ship after Lieutenant Gray was significant in three ways. First, the importance of Canada's defence policy, particularly in the Arctic. Second, the contribution to the local economy and the technological capabilities of Irving Shipbuilding. And third, progress in Japan-Canada relations.

The naming ceremony was attended by many guests, who gave speeches one after the other. First was Lieutenant Governor Mike Savage. Next was the Japanese Ambassador to Canada. This means I was given a higher-ranking position than the Minister of National Defence, the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, and the Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy. The order of greetings has its own significance and consideration, but I think it is a clear indication of the importance and priority the Royal Canadian Navy places on Japan-Canada relations surrounding Lieutenant Gray.



Ambassador's speech at the naming ceremony

I first explained that, as a native of Nagasaki, I had thought long and hard about why I had come to this naming ceremony instead of the August 9th atomic bomb memorial. I then pointed out the following three points.

- ① Lieutenant Gray's name symbolizes yesterday's enemy becoming today's friend, but also represents the evolution of a nation of comrades.
- ② It is thanks to Mr. Yoshio Kanda's conviction that Lieutenant Gray's name has come to have such meaning. Ultimately, relations between countries are the accumulation of relationships between individuals. Mr. Kanda's grandson Yoshitake and great-grandson Ibuki were also invited to the naming ceremony today.
- ③ Today, Japan-Canada relations have developed significantly, and as the two countries cooperate to realize the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," progress in cooperation in the Arctic is expected in the future. The launch of the R.H. Gray is timely and extremely significant.

In particular, when I mentioned about Mr. Kanda (mentioned above in ②), both Yoshitake and Ibuki received a warm and loud round of applause from the audience. My heart was warmed.

Furthermore, the guests offered their congratulatory addresses one after the other. The closing remarks were given by Ms. Jane Underwood, a descendant of Lieutenant Gray's family.

Then, in accordance with naval tradition, a ship christening ceremony was held. This is the essence of the naming ceremony. As representative of the ship's sponsor, Ms. Underwood, pulled on a rope and smashed a champagne bottle against the side of the new ship. There was a crashing sound as vibrant bubbles flowed down the side of the boat. At the same time, she declared, "I name you Robert Hampton Gray. Bless this ship and all who sail in it." The whole audience erupted in cheers. Under clear skies, everyone there was smiling.

After the naming ceremony was completed successfully, a crowd gathered around the Kanda family and Lieutenant Gray's relatives. It was a sight that made me realize that the foundation of relations between countries is the friendship between individuals. Still, who would have imagined that the legacy of Lieutenant Gray, who died in battle at Onagawa on this day 80 years ago, would unfold in this way at the Halifax naval base?



Ship christening at the naming ceremony

Minister of National Defence McGuinty and Commander Henwood

During the series of events surrounding the naming ceremony, I had the opportunity to meet with Canadian government and naval officials.

Minister McGuinty and I exchanged views on the development of Japan-Canada relations and cooperation in the security field. With our relationship with the Trump administration in mind, we agreed on the importance of the Arctic, including the recent deployment of R.H. Gray. Furthermore, he stressed the need for a drastic increase in Canada's defense spending, with a view to meeting new NATO standards. The conversation continued on, including on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.

I also met with Navy Commander Topshee and Royal Canadian Air Force Commander Speiser-Blanchet. On top of that, my interview with Commander Brian Henwood of the R.H. Gray was very memorable. He is a large, strong man who gives the impression of being a seasoned naval soldier. He told me, "In my previous job, I was the captain of a vessel tasked with monitoring the Arctic Ocean. I also had experience tracking suspicious Chinese vessels. I feel that the geopolitics surrounding the Arctic Ocean is becoming more severe by the day. The R.H. Gray is a larger and more powerful vessel than my previous one. I am determined to accomplish my mission."



Group Photo at the naming ceremony

The R.H. Gray is delivered to the Royal Canadian Navy after the hull and main machinery are completed and the naming ceremony is held. Over the next six months or so, final installation and adjustment of the command and communication systems, radar and sensors, navigation and fire-control computers, etc. will be carried out. After that, crew training will be carried out, followed by sea trials, before the ship is deployed on actual missions. Therefore, it is expected that R.H. Gray will begin active duty after spring 2026. The ship will depart Halifax, travel through the Northwest Passage in the Arctic Ocean, and head out to the Pacific Ocean before arriving at its home port of Esquimalt, near Victoria, British Columbia. Of the six new Arctic patrol ships, five will be based in Halifax on the Atlantic coast, but only the R.H. Gray will be deployed on the Pacific coast.

During our conversation, Commander Henwood expressed his pride in being the Commanding Officer of a ship named after a Canadian naval hero. Furthermore, he stated that, as the importance of the Arctic region grows, he also looks forward to various forms of cooperation and collaboration with Japan. He also expressed his desire to make a port call at Onagawa, where Lieutenant Gray died, at an early date.

Onagawa Bay is a natural ria-style harbor of excellent quality, which is why Imperial Japanese Navy ships gathered there at the end of the Pacific War. The Allied forces obtained this top secret information and carried out the air raid on Onagawa, and Lieutenant Gray was killed during the operation. If the R.H. Gray's port call in Onagawa becomes a reality, I am confident it will be an event that symbolizes the progress of Japan-Canada relations.



Kanda family and Lieutenant Gray's relatives

Conclusion

To reiterate, in the context of Japan-Canada relations, the name of Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray carries the connotation of overcoming past enmity and turning yesterday's enemy into today's friend. Now that it has become the name of an Arctic patrol ship, I believe Lieutenant Gray's name has taken on an even deeper meaning. In that sense, I think the catchphrase would be, "Yesterday's enemy becomes today's friend, and tomorrow's comrades for peace." Of course, the Japan-US alliance is a great example of

this in the world, but I also feel that Japan-Canada relations are making great progress.

Japan has traditionally enjoyed close economic and business ties with Canada, a resource-rich nation, but amidst the harsh geopolitical realities, Japan-Canada cooperation in the field of security is progressing. In diplomacy, certain people sometimes have symbolic significance. Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray was killed in action at Onagawa on August 9th, 80 years ago. He can be said to be a symbol of the new Japan-Canada relationship in the 21st century.