



Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia Information Note

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Ship Sponsor

A “ship sponsor” is a representative of the authority who ordered the building of the ship, and is a tradition in naval and commercial shipbuilding. The position of sponsor is much related to the ceremony which takes place with the launching and naming of the ship. That ceremony has its basis in religion and is analogous to a baptism and christening of a person. It is only recently that the term ‘christening’ was changed to ‘naming’ for warships, at least in practice in Canada though not in all other modern states. So there are similarities between a ship sponsor and the sponsor or sponsors (godparents) of a person. Just like a sponsor is present at a baptism, the beginning of a religious life, so too is a ship sponsor present at the early significant dates of a ship, the laying of the keel and the naming and launching ceremonies.

The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) takes many of its traditions from the Royal Navy. For many centuries it was the Crown or male regal representative who was the principle personage at a christening and launching of a warship. In 1811 the Prince Regent invited a lady to be a sponsor, and that practice continues in the RCN. A lady of distinction or a lady with some link to the warship (e.g., a descendant of the person after whom the ship is named) is invited to be the sponsor, and after accepting, is so appointed for the life of the ship. The sponsor has roles during the laying of the keel, declaring the keel “well and truly laid,” and during the naming and launching, during which she breaks a bottle over the vessel’s bow whilst declaring “I name thee HMCS <name>, God bless this ship and all who sail in her.” The bottle can be considered a modern (by several centuries) custom, originating from the water used in a baptism. Water was used at first for ship christenings but after the fifteenth century wine was used.

It is expected that a sponsor retain a relationship with her ship and the ship’s company (naval equivalent of crew) throughout the life of the ship. How this is done is dependent on the personalities involved. If the sponsor passes away before the ship is ‘paid off’ (taken out of naval service), no new sponsor is appointed.

Ship sponsor is also a tradition with commercial ships, tugs, pilot boats and fishing vessels. The sponsor is always a prominent lady in the company owning the vessel, the owner's wife or daughter, a lady member of the Board of Directors, or in the community where the ship will be based.

Reference: Customs and Traditions of the Canadian Navy, Lieutenant(N) Graeme Arbuckle, 1984