

THE ADMIRAL'S VIEW

Health and Wellness – A Royal Canadian Navy Priority



By Rear Admiral Dave Gardam Commander Joint Task Force Atlantic and Maritime Forces Atlantic

Typically, New Year's is a time when we take stock of the state of our lives and set goals for the coming year. Many of us will re-examine our lifestyles and determine that we should place a greater emphasis on healthy living. Accordingly, this is an ideal time to discuss the health and wellness within the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). Health and wellness are critical to the overall well-being of each of us, but the extra stress on sailors and their families created by working in a ship at sea combined with a deployment cycle and its attendant challenges makes this an extraordinarily complex problem for the RCN. Maritime Forces Atlantic (MARLANT) launched a Health and Wellness Campaign in October 2012 which is intended to address this challenge. It will require a long-term sustained effort to achieve a cultural shift towards a healthier and more balanced lifestyle within MARLANT. This proactive campaign is based upon four pillars: active living and injury prevention; addiction-free living; nutritional wellness; and social and mental wellness.

A ship at sea is no ordinary office and sailors must overcome many challenges while working at sea: fatigue due to 14-16 hour work days seven days a week, the isolation of being confined in a ship for weeks at a time, and separation from friends and family. In addition, there are the operational stresses associated with conducting operations in areas of the world where the rule of law and political stability are quite different from what we enjoy in Canada. This includes regions where illegal activities such as piracy, narcotics trafficking, and human smuggling are commonplace. Furthermore, many of the places we send our ships are embroiled in regional conflicts where the threat of violence due to terrorist attacks and war is prevalent.

The operational tempo of 2013 is already in full swing and HMCS TORONTO departed for the Middle East on January 14. This deployment is representative of the types of demands we place on our sailors. The ship's company of TORONTO will be deployed for more than six months in order to contribute to the global effort to bring stability to that region. This follows on a busy sailing schedule during the summer and fall of 2012 during which the ship and her crew were frequently away preparing for the current



deployment. HMCS TORONTO's ship's company is but one example of the numerous deployments which will occur in 2013 and will require a great many of our sailors to be deployed for extensive periods away from their families.

The Health and Wellness Campaign is an important initiative to support the needs of our defence team and their families. The commitment of MARLANT leaders to this effort has been critical to creating the momentum necessary to launch this campaign. Participation in fitness programs at CF gyms in Halifax has increased markedly since the campaign kick-off in October as leaders at all levels within MARLANT rallied behind this initiative. Menus in the galleys both at sea and ashore are also changing to offer more healthy choices including an increased focus on fresh fruit and vegetables. Addiction-free living and social and mental wellness are more complex issues to address. Initial actions to advance these pillars are centered around better communication with our members so that they are better equipped to recognize when an individual is out of balance and how to access the excellent support programs that have been established to support the defence team.

Further to our own Health and Wellness Campaign, MARLANT has been working in concert with Capital Health and the Province of Nova Scotia to help promote our common interests in Health and Wellness. The Province of Nova Scotia launched its own policy, "Thrive", in June 2012 which has many commonalities with our campaign.

The framework of this campaign represents a very important step in a long-term cultural shift towards healthier lifestyles for MARLANT personnel. This program reinforces the initiative of the province to improve the state of health for all Nova Scotians, and will also better prepare the defence team to weather the future challenges which the deployment cycle places on our sailors and their families.