



Barrie McKenna

The sad saga of the boats that wouldn't float

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As Ottawa prepares to place its largest shipbuilding order in decades – \$35-billion worth of patrol ships, icebreakers and research ships – it's worth checking in on the government's last big navy purchase.

Remember the four second-hand subs the government bought from Britain for \$800-million back in 1998?

You would be forgiven for losing track. Amid endless refits and repairs, the subs have spent far more time in dry dock than patrolling Canada's coasts in the 13 years the navy has owned them.

And shockingly, none of the four subs is operational. Only one is in water, HMCS Victoria, which is slated to make its first dive later this fall after a major overhaul.

Not one of the subs is weapons-ready. It will be at least another two years before the subs are equipped to fire torpedoes. And it will cost Ottawa an estimated \$125-million to retrofit the ships to fire the same Mk 48 torpedoes used on its now-retired Oberon-class submarines.

The plan is to have two subs fully operational next year and all four in 2013, according to navy spokeswoman Lieutenant Heather McDonald.

"We're near the end of a long beginning," Lt. McDonald said.

One of the subs, HMCS Windsor, is so badly rusted that it's apparently limited in its ability to dive deeply beneath the seas. In July, Canadian navy officials offered a less-than-ringing endorsement of the ship's sea-worthiness.

"The submarine is safe to perform all expected operations during her operations period until her next extended docking work period," Blaine Duffley, director of maritime equipment project management for the subs, recently told the Canadian Press. The sub is now in dry dock on the East Coast.

The rest of the fleet is grounded. HMCS Chicoutimi caught fire in 2004 on its voyage from Britain and won't be ready until 2013. HMCS Corner Brook is undergoing maintenance on the West Coast, and also won't be operational until 2013.

Military experts don't dispute the value of submarines to a nation such as Canada, with its vast coastline. The stealthy diesel-electric subs can covertly combat smuggling, illegal fishing, terrorism and polluters.

And the initial purchase price was much lower than buying new subs. Australia, for example, has paid nearly \$1-billion apiece for its six new ones.

If Ottawa is to learn anything from the subs saga, it's time to divulge the all-in cost of the four ships, which Britain mothballed as part of its conversion to a nuclear-powered fleet. The \$800-million purchase price bought Canada four hulking steel shells. Ottawa has spent another \$1.5-billion on maintenance and support.

But that's only part of the cost of Canadianizing the subs.

Readying the ships for action is costing still more, according to publicly available information. Ottawa has sunk at least \$370-million into upgrades and refits. It has also spent millions to transport the subs via the Panama Canal to the West Coast, where the refit work is being done. It will cost another \$125-million to give them torpedoes. In Halifax, the navy has spent \$47-million to renovate its maintenance dockyard to accommodate the submarines.

Further repairs to deal with persistent rust problems could cost millions more.

A rough and unofficial tally of what's been spent is now approaching \$3-billion. Add in the mind-boggling delays, and the original fire-sale price seems considerably less attractive.

The Harper government and the navy have repeatedly defended the sub purchase, initiated by the previous Liberal government, as a good deal for taxpayers. Mr. Harper has also championed the cause of giving the Canadian Forces the tools they need to do their jobs.

But the government has never disclosed the full cost of readying the subs to patrol Canadian shores – a mission that remains unfulfilled. And all the while the aging subs' useful lifespan is ebbing away.

It's time for a full accounting of the depressing saga.

The next few years could prove difficult ones for Canada's military. A recent report by Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie, chief of transformation, is recommending \$1-billion in annual cuts in a reorganization that could see as many as 11,000 positions vanish, mostly at headquarters in Ottawa.

In an environment of restraint, the Harper government should do a better job of openly explaining, and justifying, its ongoing military purchases.