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The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946

An anti-colonial attitude swept through India. Indians deeply resented the fact that their army was now being sent to crush the new peoples' governments in Burma, Indonesia and Indo-China, and re-establish French and Dutch colonies. In the last months of 1945, police killed 63 protesters in Bombay and Calcutta. These were turbulent times and the young Indian soldier was deeply affected. As BC Dutt, one of the leaders of the RIN mutiny wrote in his memoir, 'The barrack walls were no longer high enough to contain the tide of nationalism'.

In Bombay, HMIS *Talwar* was the signal-training establishment of the RIN. With 1500 officers and enlisted members on board, it was the second-largest training center in the whole empire. In the informative recollections titled *Mutiny of the Innocents* and *The RIN Strike By a Group of Victimized Ratings*, the former mutineers detailed the squalor on board the *Talwar* and the indifference or racism of the British officers. The Ratings came from widely different regions... belonged to Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Sikh families. The years spent in the navy had made them – the ratings of the RIN – Indians'. Some formed a clandestine group called 'Azadi Hindi' and planned to create general disorder and unrest on *Talwar*. On Navy Day, 1st Dec, 1945, they painted 'Quit India', 'Inquilab Zindabad' and 'Revolt Now' all over the establishment and repeated it when Commander-in-Chief General Auchinleck came on a visit. Dutt was eventually arrested but his defiant reply to Commanding Officer King – '...Save your breath, I am ready to face your firing squad' – made him an instant hero. The unprecedented incidents received press coverage and surprised everyone. However, CO King responded by calling the ratings 'you sons of bitches' and 'sons of bloody jungles'. The emboldened ratings replied with slogans painted all over the *Talwar*, and even deflated the tires of King's car. Though the events were confined to one center, word spread to all the ships and shore establishments in Bombay. Ratings openly began to discuss politics, set up a INA Relief Fund and submitted individual letters protesting against CO King.

The strike at HMIS *Talwar* ripples outwards—On February 17, when the ratings reiterated their demand for decent food, British officers sneered that 'beggars cannot be choosers'. This was the last straw. On the 18th morning, 1500 ratings walked out of the mess hall in protest, a clear act of mutiny. They also declared that 'this is not a mere food riot. We are about to create history... a heritage of pride for free India.' By 4.30pm, the ratings had rejected the appeals of their officers and even Rear Admiral Rattray. The 'strike committee' decided their task was to take over the RIN and place it in the command of national leaders. A formal list of demands called for release of all Indian political prisoners including INA POWs and naval detainees, withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia and Egypt, equal status of pay and allowances and best class of Indian food. It also formally asked the British to quit India. By that night, AIR (All India Radio) and BBC had to broadcast the news of the RIN strike and it spread like wildfire across the country.

Starting in Bombay, the naval strike spread across British India, from Karachi to Calcutta and ultimately came to involve 78 ships, 20 shore establishments and 20,000 sailors. The ratings in Calcutta, Madras, Karachi and Vizag went on strike with the slogans "Strike for Bombay", "Release 11,000 INA prisoners" and "Jai Hind" (Victory to India). The mutineers kept in touch via the radio relayed from HMIS *Talwar*. The White Ensign was hauled down. Signifying their unity and wish to overcome the divisions among Indian political leaders, the mutinying ships hoisted three flags tied together — those of the Congress, Muslim League, and the Red Flag of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

Hundreds of strikers from the sloops, minesweepers and shore establishments in Bombay demonstrated for 2 hours along Hornby Road. Many of the men had armed themselves with spanners and iron bars. But they had wide support, and there were many spontaneous actions. In some places vehicles carrying mail were stopped and the mail burnt. British men and women going in cars and victorias were made to get down and shout "Jai Hind" (Victory to India). Meanwhile the navy's big guns were trained on the Taj Mahal Hotel, the Yacht Club and other buildings from morning till evening.



CMHS Meeting

The next CMHS
meeting will be
held on

**Tuesday,
May 17th,
2016**

7:00 pm
At the
Petty Officers'
Mess

Notice of Next Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on
Tuesday, May 17th. 2015,
19:00 (7:00 pm)

At the Petty Officers' Mess, HMCS Tecumseh.

Members are reminded that an offering of foodstuffs for the Legion Food Bank is considered your unofficial entrance fee to our regular scheduled meetings.

The unofficial agenda of this meeting will be:

Introduction of guests, Minutes of last meeting Correspondence, Membership report Treasurer's report, Old business / New business Break, Show & Tell
The President, **Kevin Roberts** would like to invite everyone to remain after the meeting for an informal time of fellowship.

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Onshore the mutineers were supported by demonstrations which included a one-day general strike in Bombay. The strike spread to other cities, and was joined by the Royal Indian Air Force and local police forces. Naval officers and men began calling themselves the "Indian National Navy" and offered left-handed salutes to British officers. At some places, NCOs in the British Indian Army ignored and defied orders from British superiors. In Madras and Pune, the British garrisons had to face revolts within the ranks of the Indian Army. A Gurkha unit refused orders to fire on strikers,

It should be noted that the sailors' grievance over food was but small compared with what many civilians had endured. While the Indian army and navy had been expected to help defend India and serve the British empire during the War, the British authorities had let three million people die from famine in Bengal in 1943. Small wonder that now, taking the naval mutiny as signal that their time had come, people took part in widespread rioting in Calcutta and elsewhere.

But the mutineers received no support from the national leaders. Mahatma Gandhi in a statement on 3 March 1946 criticised the strikers for mutinying without the call of a "prepared revolutionary party" and without the "guidance and intervention" of "political leaders of their choice". He further criticised the local Indian National Congress leader **Aruna Asaf Ali**, one of the few prominent political leaders of the time to offer her support for the mutineers, stating she would rather unite Hindus and Muslims on the barricades than on the constitutional front.

The Muslim League argued that the unrest of the sailors was not best expressed on the streets, however serious the grievance may be. Legitimacy could only be conferred by a recognised political leadership. Spontaneous upsurges could only disrupt political consensus. Thus the two main parties, on course to accept British backed partition, with all the bloodshed that followed, were united for once in asserting their authority, against the sailors who mounted such a powerful show of unity and threat to British rule, and against the masses who were ready to support the sailors.

By February 20, the third day, British destroyers had positioned themselves off Bombay. The British prime minister, Labour's Clement Attlee, ordered the Royal Navy to put down the revolt. Admiral J.H. Godfrey, the Flag Officer commanding the RIN, went on air with his order to "Submit or perish". Rumours spread that Australian and Canadian armed battalions had been stationed outside the Lion gate and the Gun gate to encircle the dockyard where most ships were berthed. However, by this time, all the armouries of the ships and establishments had been seized by the striking ratings. The clerks, cleaning hands, cooks and wireless operators of the striking ship armed themselves with whatever weapon was available to resist the British destroyers that had sailed from Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

The Royal Air Force flew a squadron of bombers low over Bombay harbour in a show of force, as Admiral Rattray, Flag Officer, Bombay, RIN, issued an ultimatum asking the ratings to raise black flags and surrender unconditionally. **(One interesting rumor has it that a Squadron of Royal Indian Air Force planes were ordered to do this however the entire fleet of planes all developed "engine problems")**

In Karachi, the 2nd Battalion of the Black Watch had been called from their barracks. The first priority was to deal with the mutiny on Manora Island where the HMIS Hindustan was stationed. Ratings holding the Hindustan opened fire when attempts were made to board the ship.

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Family of Victims in Bengal, Nov. 1943



HMIS Hindustan

Minutes of the last meeting

Minutes of the meeting of the **Calgary Military Historical Society**

Meeting held on April 19, 2016 at the Petty Officer's Mess, HMCS Tecumseh

1. **Meeting called to order** by President Kevin R. at 7:10 PM. 28 members in attendance including two new members, James Baker and Zachary Huttley.
2. **Minutes of Previous Meeting.** Discussed and call for approval by Member Susan E. moves that the Previous Meeting Minutes be accepted. Seconded by Alan R. Approved, Unanimous.
3. **Newsletter.**
No omissions or corrections.
4. **Treasures Report.**
Report by Susan E. as Floyd was absent. Lists of monies collected from book auctions, donations etc. Listing of expenditures. Member Mike C. moves that the Treasures report be accepted as reported. Seconded by Barry E. Approved, Unanimous.
5. **Membership Report.**
Report by Susan E. Total 42 members (2 Life, 1 Hon., 39 regular). Member Barry E. moves that the Membership report be accepted as reported. Seconded by Member Dave S. Accepted, Unanimous.
6. **Old Business.** Facebook page is up and running. Need moderator. Indra R. offers to moderate with transition aid from Kevin R.
Alan M. and Gary M. report on the WWI Military Symposium held at the Military Museums Of Calgary.
7. **Announcements:** Calgary Regional History Fair, May 15, 2016 at the Calgary Aerospace Museum. This year only the top entries from each participating school to be entered.
8. **Correspondence:** None
9. **New Business:** - Should we post CMHS newsletter on the new Facebook page?
- Dave L. broaches topic, "What to do with your collection as we age or worse? Future discussion required.
- Due to Neil's busy schedule, we need to replace Neil with Book Auction duties. David G. accepts.
10. **Break**
11. **Show and Tell:**
David G - Selection of old military flashlights.
Barry E. - Pacific Coast Rangers beret, WW1 body bags.
Dave S. - Cap badges WW2, 2 officer BC Hussars, 1 BC Dragoon 1st pattern, 5 RCAC and a RCAF Pathfinder badge.
Allan R. - Trinidad & Tobago insignia display.
Bruce G. - Black Watch RHR - Regimental Book.
Mike C. - Boer War Insignia and medal display for Cpl Joseph La Falamme & GSgt Thomas Bromah, 3 Boer W memorial plaques (small, med & large size) personal purchase.
Alan M. - Discusses interest in creating displays, 2016 AACCA Show display example.
James B. - Discusses his grandfather, LSH WW1 & WWII service, returned as Quartermaster Sgt Major.
Gary M. - Discusses 2016 AACCA display, WW II Arctic Star, UK Cadet Forces Medal.
Brad M.- Classic cold war spy camera c/w case, flash & 2 film rolls.
Reid F - US WWII campaign medals, N Africa & Italy
Rob W. - South African Service medal.
James B. - Fort McLeod James Stewart Family Auction - 117 flatbed truck loads of items.
Daryl K. - WWI CEF insignia display, cap, collar & shoulders.
12. **Adjournment:**
Member Mike C. calls for motion to adjourn. Seconded by Susan E.
Meeting Adjourned. 20:50

At midnight, the 2nd Battalion was ordered to proceed to Manora, expecting resistance from the Indian naval ratings who had taken over the shore establishments. The Battalion was ferried silently across in launches and landing craft. D company was the first across, and they immediately proceeded to the southern end of the island. The remainder of the Battalion stayed at the southern end of the Island. By the morning, the British soldiers had secured the island.

Confrontation with the *Hindustan*

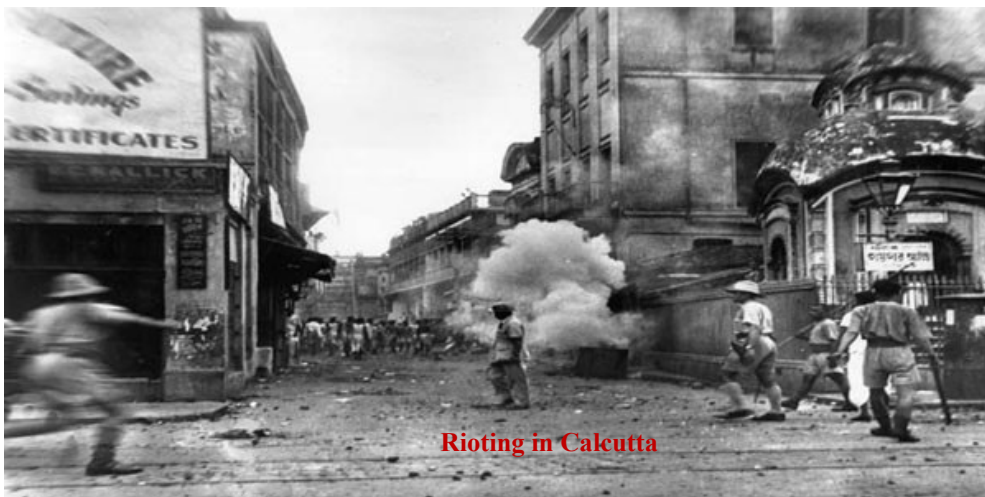
The decision was made to confront the Indian naval ratings on board the destroyer *Hindustan*, armed with 4-in. guns. During the morning three guns from the Royal Artillery C. Troop arrived on the island. The Royal Artillery positioned the battery within point blank range of the *Hindustan* on the dockside. An ultimatum was delivered to the mutineers aboard *Hindustan*, stating that if they did not leave the ship and put down their weapons by 10:30 they would have to face the consequences. The deadline came and went and there was no message from the ship or any movement. Orders were given to open fire at 10:33. The gunners' first round was on target. On board the *Hindustan* the Indian naval ratings began to return gunfire and several shells whistled over the Royal Artillery guns. Most of the shells fired by the Indian ratings went harmlessly overhead and fell on Karachi itself. They had not been primed so there were no casualties. However, the mutineers could not hold on. At 10:51 the white flag was raised. British naval personnel boarded the ship to remove casualties and the remainder of the mutinous crew. Extensive damage had been done to *Hindustan's* superstructure and there were many casualties among the Indian sailors.

The mutiny was called off following a meeting between the President of the Naval Central Strike Committee and members of the Congress, who had been sent to Bombay to settle the crisis. A statement was issued calling on the strikers to end their action, which was later echoed by a statement issued in Calcutta by Mohammed Ali Jinnah on behalf of the Muslim League. Under these considerable pressures, the strikers gave way.

The negotiations lasted some days, and it seemed as though the demands of the strikers were conceded in principle. Immediate steps were taken to improve the quality of food served in the ratings' kitchen and their living conditions. The national leaders also assured that favourable consideration would be accorded to the release of all the prisoners of the Indian National Army. However, despite assurances of the good services of the Congress and the Muslim League widespread arrests were made. These were fol-

lowed up by courts martial and large scale dismissals from the service. None of those dismissed were reinstated into either the Indian or Pakistani navies after independence, nor were they offered compensation.

Disturbances continued on shore after the strike had ended, and a British intelligence summary issued on March 25, 1946 admitted that the Indian army, navy and air force units were no longer trust worthy, and if wide-scale public unrest took shape, the armed forces could not be relied upon to support counter-insurgency operations as they had been during the Quit India movement of 1942. Coupled with the strikes that erupted across the Royal Air



Rioting in Calcutta

Force that year, the Indian navy mutiny was therefore a key factor in the British government's decision to get out of India. British Prime Minister Clement Attlee admitted as much.

The Indian and Pakistani governments have been less honest in acknowledging this event for many years.. In one incident in West Bengal in 1965, a play based on the events, *Kallol* (Sound of the Wave), was banned by the Congress government, and playwright Utpal Dutt imprisoned. In later years India felt it safer to adopt the history. The RIN Mutiny was renamed the Naval Uprising, a statue erected in Mumbai, and Navy ships named after two prominent mutineers, Madan Singh and B.C Dutt.

The rest of the world has been educated by Western cinema's version of India's road to independence, those who fight oppression are periodically advised to follow the path of Gandhi, and stick to non-violent civil disobedience (and usually the emphasis is on civil, rather than disobedience). Without detracting either from the Mahatma's greatness or that of the masses who followed him, we must remember also the persuasive part played by the guns of the Indian navy when they were trained on the Bombay yacht club!



Naval uprising statue in Mumbai