



Uncharted course

BY JASON WINDERS, MES'10, PHD'16

Jeffery Hutchinson, LLB'94, was named Commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard in March 2017, after having served as Deputy Commissioner, Strategy and Shipbuilding from 2015-17. (SPECIAL TO ALUMNI GAZETTE)

Jeffery Hutchinson, LLB'94, navigated an unexpected path to Coast Guard

Jeffery Hutchinson never set out to chart a meandering course toward the Canadian Coast Guard.

His visions were of operating rooms, not open waters. Yet, following a challenging first year at Western when his pre-Med dreams ended quickly, Hutchinson stepped away from school and headed to sea.

His parents, neither of whom attended university, were trepidacious about the move.

"It was difficult for them. After I left school after that bad year, my father's deepest fear was I would not go back," Hutchinson, LLB'94, explained. "But he was the person who encouraged me most strongly to travel, to see the world, to make a contribution by volunteering, and then decide on what my next step would be. My father was driven by his personal faith to do things on a large scale.

"He came from a small place, but he had a large vision of the world."

Born, raised and educated in London, Hutchinson had never set foot on a ship, let alone lived on one. Yet, he ended up on a relief and

development ship cleaning up Jamaica in the aftermath of Hurricane Gilbert, a massive storm that killed 49 people and left the island looking, according to then-Prime Minister Edward Seaga, "like Hiroshima after the atom bomb."

The experience opened Hutchinson's eyes to a world he never considered.

For a moment, he almost remained in the Caribbean when offered a job "doing sound for a band on the island." He thought better of that and returned to Western where he eventually ended up pursuing Law.

"I had no intention of being a lawyer. I am pretty sure by the time I started Law school, I had never met a lawyer," Hutchinson said. "But I have a genetic wiring that makes me a bit rules oriented. I loved frameworks and structure. I found myself attracted to the law's historic roots – how the law developed, the philosophical and religious influences on it. And the toolset you got, in terms of both analysis and problem-solving, that all clicked for me. That all appealed to me.

"I spent three years in law school. I am the only person in my class that wished law school was a year longer."

After graduation, he became a Department of Justice attorney, working in Halifax, White Horse and Ottawa, focusing mainly on Indigenous law. He worked closely with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As the Executive Director of the Independent Assessment Process, he set up the original out-of-court process to resolve claims of sexual and/or physical abuse that caused psychological harm to former students of Indian Residential Schools.



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"Working with the TRC was a highlight of my career, but it was also emotionally draining work. I remember sitting in my office in the evenings, working through claims I had to sign off on, and reading about little kids who had been so mistreated and then thinking about my kids at home who were the same age. After a certain amount of time, I needed a reprieve from that."

After a stint in the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat office – where he "learned a thing or two about how Ottawa works" – he was recruited to the Canadian Coast Guard. In March 2017, Hutchinson was appointed Commissioner to lead the organization and its 5,000 individuals charged with overseeing Canadian waters.

Formed in 1962, the Canadian Coast Guard is tasked with marine search and rescue, communication, navigation and transportation issues in Canadian waters, such as navigation aids and icebreaking, marine pollution response and providing support for other government initiatives. Headquartered in Ottawa, the organization operates 119 vessels and 22 helicopters, among others.

Since taking the helm, Hutchinson has helped restore the financial health of the organization, as well as expanded its recruiting push beyond traditional boundaries. It is a challenge he has embraced, if not expected.

"What we do at the front line, and the level of commitment I see, it inspires me every day." *WAG*

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