

The Canadian Coast Guard

By The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre

The Prescott Canadian Coast Guard is responsible for maintaining the Marine Transportation System on Canadian waters. The Prescott branch's area of operations extends from the Beauharnois Canal near Montreal to Grand Bend on Lake Huron. This area also includes portions of the Ottawa River, St. Lawrence Seaway, Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and the Detroit River, covering roughly 3300 KM of shoreline. The Prescott base has several responsibilities, including the following: maintaining navigational aids, search and rescue, icebreaking and winter reconnaissance, and responding to pollution accidents. The base also manages the Navigable Waters Protection Act, an act that regulates the construction of any structure that may obstruct the free movement of vessels on navigable waters.



Canadian Coast Guard Coat of Arms

The Coast Guard facilities, stretching about two blocks on King Street West, are used primarily for maintaining aids to navigation as well as Coast Guard ships and ice breakers. The facility also houses a small port and helipad for Coast Guard vehicles to travel to and from when performing route duties. It houses office facilities, radio communication rooms, a water pollutant testing system and a small museum in the lobby.

The history of the Canadian Coast Guard operations in Prescott dates to 1903 as the Dominion Lighthouse Depot. Originally located in Morrisburg, the plant specializing in the production of navigational aids, moved to Prescott, taking up quarters in the old Labatt's Brewery at 401 King Street West. The DLD was one of Prescott's largest employers during the early 20th century, with an estimated workforce of around 100 citizens. The company expanded in several sections during the 1910s and 1920s. Labatt's building served as the main office for DLD, while the company's et.

machine shop, carpentry shop, gas test room and drive shed were torn down and moved eastward to the newly purchased abandoned Imperial Starch building in 1914. The development of this new east wing spanned from 1914 to 1926. At the time of its completion, the DLD's facilities spanned 75,000 square feet, excluding a rail track that ran along Water Street to the Canadian Pacific Railway's rail yards located east of Water Street.



The Dominion Lighthouse Depot

In the following decade the DLD slowly shifted all their facilities to the Imperial Strach building and rented out the old Labatt's building to a variety of tenants during the 1920s. In 1931 the property was obtained by the government and repurposed as the Regimental Headquarters and Armoury for the local military regiment the Prescott IV Hussars. The IV Hussars remained stationed at the Armoury building until their disbandment in 1943 when all the members were called to serve overseas during WWII. The Merchant Marines took over the facility as a training school for the remainder of WWII. Upon the local regiments reformation in 1946, they continued to operate in this building until it was destroyed by fire in 1960.

When operations first began in Prescott, the CGS Scout, CGS Reserve (formerly named Alaska), and the CGS Grenville were the primary ships used for transporting goods by water from DLD. However, by 1915 only the CGS Grenville was still in operation in the area, with the CGS Scout serving the eastern end of the DLD's area of service, while the newly purchased CGS Concretia served the west end of the district.

The CGS Scout was pulled from service in 1930; however, the fate of the DLD's other two ships was eventful. During a severe storm in December 1921, the Concretia was driven into a bay on the east coast of Main Duck Island in Prince Edward County, Ontario. When her anchors could not hold, the ship drifted with the high winds and water so far onto the island that she became stranded when the storm subsided. Unable to move the vessel off the island, the ship's crew was taken ashore unharmed as the vessel remained there until the following month, when the water levels returned to a high level. The ship remained a part of the fleet until 1935, when it was sold to Kingston to be used as a barge for its Harbour.



The CGS Concretia



The CGS Grenville

The Grenville met its untimely end in December 1968, sinking at Beauharnois, Quebec, in a severe storm. At 164 feet in length and a 30-foot breadth, the wooden ship had over 5-decades of service as the primary DLD ship on the Great Lakes. She had the rare distinction of having been wrecked twice, with the ship being beached along the coast of Georgian Bay in 1917 – also in a severe winter storm.

During WWII, DLD produced military supplies such as U-Boat pistols, transportation cases for torpedoes and other monitors alongside its duties of manufacturing and maintaining navigational aids. The DLD was one of several factories hand-picked by the Government of Canada to manufacture these goods, making it one of the first companies to manufacture U-boat machinery outside of the United Kingdom. This expansion saw the DLD's workforce climb to an estimated 600 workers during its peak, many of whom travelled from across Canada to work at the plant. During WWII, the DLD was one of a handful of manufacturers within Prescott who hired women, with an estimated 150 of the 600 members of the organization being women during this time. Many of these workers served as goods inspectors at DLD. The facility's carpentry shops were turned into packaging facilities for these supplies, with the DLD using an estimated 600 miles' worth of lumber to crate each of these packages. The Canadian Pacific Railway handled the shipping of goods across Canada, while the Canadian Passenger Car & Passenger Transfer Company handled the shipping of goods across the St. Lawrence by way of the Prescott and Ogdensburg railcar ferry. Roughly 2000 depth charges and 1000 U-Boat weapons were made each month at DLD, with a monetary value estimated at \$5 million.

Some of the individuals responsible for the operation included: T.G. Kincaid, Superintendent of War Contracts; Lorne Armstrong, Personnel Manager; J.F. Saunders, Carpentry Manager; Dowsley Kingston, Night Superintendent; C.R. Dunne, Stores Manager; W.J. Byrne, Accountant; Lorne Knight, Chief Engineer; and Arthur T. Thompson, Lead Agent.

After the end of WWII, the DLD returned to producing and maintaining navigational aids along Canada's waterways. Upon the creation of the Canadian Coast Guard service on January 26th, 1962, Prescott was one of several dozen locations across Canada to be chosen as a station for the newly formed organization. The DLD, which was already under government control, was renamed the Canadian Coast Guard Station Prescott and fitted with state-of-the-art technology to conduct its services.



Arial View of Canadian Coast Guard

By the early 1980s, the original Imperial Starch brick building was showing structural faults. Its main support beams were riddled with dry rot, making renovations far more expensive than constructing a new facility. Broken into three phases, the project, valued at an estimated \$8 million in value, implemented a completely modern, refreshed facility specializing in energy conservation. Phase 1 opened in 1983 and included the facility's storage rooms and hazardous materials containers. Phase 2 opened in 1985, brought the main administrative building we see today, alongside several carpentry, welding, mechanic and electrical shops. The following year, the brick building once home to the DLD and Imperial Starch Company was demolished. The final phase, including an expansion of the storage facilities and a parking lot, was completed in 1988. The federal government invested roughly \$2.36 million into the base beginning in 1999 for the complete reconstitution of the base's deteriorating wharves. This included a new boat ramp, docking facilities, and a center basin to be used for larger ships. Upon the completion of this project, the ships, the CCGS Simcoe and Griffon, made Prescott their home.

The Simcoe was an ice-strengthened navigational aid tender constructed in 1962. It primarily engaged in buoy placement, service and removal. It operated mainly in the Upper St. Lawrence River, from Beauharnois Canal in Quebec to Kingston and the eastern end of Lake Ontario. It had a length of 54.6 meters and carries a crew of 23. It was pulled from service in 2007.

The Griffon is one of a handful of ships in the Canadian Coast Guard's fleet that can carry a helicopter. Located on its aft deck, the vessel can accommodate one Bell 206 helicopter, often used by the Canadian Coast Guard. It mainly serves as a search and rescue vessel alongside its icebreaking duties from Port Colborne to Lake Huron.

In September 2026, the Canadian Coast Guard introduced a new ship apart of the Prescott branch's fleet. Named the CCGS Judy LaMarsh in honour of the Honourable Judy LaMarsh, one of the first women to serve as a federal Cabinet Minister.

In modern times the Canadian Coast Guard Prescott branch has experienced several changes and upgrades regarding developing technologies alongside the implantation of several new environmental and national defense duties. Since 2025, the Canadian Coast Guard has moved under the Department of National Defense portfolio to strengthen Canada's ability to respond to emerging threats and to protect its borders, particularly in remote and Arctic regions.



The Canadian Coast Guard - Present Day

The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre
Open Wednesday - Saturday, 11-5
202 King Street West, Prescott, ON

