

Thousands celebrate



CP photo
Master Seaman Jim Hickey's daughter Rebecca howls as he holds her in Halifax Sunday. The child wasn't quite used to her father after his many months away in the gulf aboard the Protecteur.

By Sun Times news services

HALIFAX — Tears of joy mixed with lingering resentment as thousands turned out Sunday to welcome Canada's sailors home from the Persian Gulf.

Holding up signs, Valentine hearts or waving yellow balloons and Canadian flags, the wives, relatives and friends of the about 900 crew members of HMCS Athabaskan, Terra Nova and Protecteur waited in a steady drizzle while the three warships steamed into Halifax harbor.

Heather Christianson of Mount Uniacke, near Halifax, was anxious to see her husband, Donnie, a crewman aboard the Athabaskan who married her just two months before the ships left last August.

"We won't be cold for long when they get off the ships," she said, stomping her feet to keep warm.

It was the first time in 40 years Canadian navy ships arrived to Halifax from a war, and the city was ready for a celebration.

The sight of the ships sent up cheers among the rows of spectators lining both sides of the harbor and the more than 1,000 people who looked down from the Angus A. Macdonald bridge connecting Halifax and Dartmouth.

But there was widespread resentment at Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's presence at the welcoming-home ceremonies.

"I think he should have been here when they left and I think everybody else does too," said Vernon Matheson, who had come

from New Brunswick to see his son. He was referring to the prime minister's absence during last August's sendoff.

"It's too late to get votes now."

Some did not even notice Mulroney's presence, and the prime minister seemed content to stay in the background throughout most of Sunday morning's celebrations.

He was joined by wife Milla and Gov.-Gen. Ray Hnatyshyn, Defence Minister Bill McKnight and Chief of Defence Staff John de Chastelain in the reviewing stand. Then he briefly greeted about 20 members of the Terra Nova before departing.

"I'm just grateful they're all back safe and sound," he told a reporter. He did not address the crowd, leaving the official welcoming address to Hnatyshyn.

On board the Terra Nova, Petty Officer Christopher Lee and wife Jeanne seemed oblivious to the prime minister and everything else. They stood for several minutes hugging and kissing, their tears mixing in with the cold rain.

Yellow ribbons have started to come down in and around Keady now that Canada's troops are home safely.