Readiness? Aye, Ready! In Conversation with Rear-Admiral John Newton

Andrea Lane

When first arranged in spring 2016, this profile of Rear-Admiral John Newton was to be a simple, conventional Question and Answer session, with a series of prepared questions designed to interest both audience and subject. Once welcomed into Admiral Newton's office, however, it became clear to me that such an arrangement was not going to be satisfactory to either party. Instead, the Admiral – so busy that his time was scheduled to the minute, aides waiting anxiously at the door – made himself available for an unscripted and wide-ranging conversation. Wide-ranging enough, it must be said, that it would be impossible to relay everything that was discussed. Instead, this profile will focus on one of Newton's particular responsibilities, *readiness*, and what his vision, both as Commander Maritime Forces Atlantic (MARLANT) and as an individual, is for the navy in this area.

Rear-Admiral Newton's office was a fitting setting for this conversation. From the office, perched above the water's edge, one can see all the activity of the Halifax Dockyard and harbour. Newton was especially eager to point out the construction going on all around us, in the enormous Irving Shipyard halls next door and at the excavation site where a new jetty, designated NJ, will be home to the Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) when they are built. The beginning of Newton's term as Commander Maritime Forces Atlantic in 2013 coincided with the beginning of these ambitious infrastructure projects, and he seems to draw inspiration from the bustle outside his office windows, the noise of which would occasionally punctuate our conversation. Ships leaving on exercises, returning from deployment, and being towed to the fueling jetty can all be seen from Newton's office 'bridge wing,' reinforcing the centrality of his responsibility for force readiness and force generation – that is, for providing ships and sailors, trained and capable, for use at home and abroad.

Admiral Newton wears three hats, so to speak: as MARLANT; as Commander Joint Task Force-Atlantic (JTF-A) for the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC); and as the Maritime Component Commander (MCC) for CJOC. His MCC role is to provide operational advice and maritime environment expertise when needed to assist units under CJOC command deployed in

Credit: OP Caribbe, DND

Following a training exercise in preparation for ***Operation Caribbe****, HMC* ***Saskatoon****, HMCS* ***Edmonton*** *and the US Coast Guard Ship* ***Haddock*** *sail off the coast of San Diego, California, 26 February 2016.*

Credit: Corporal Anthony Chand, Formation Imagery Services

*HMCS **Fredericton** departs Malaga, Spain, after a port visit during **Operation Reassurance**, 30 May 2016.*

operations like *Operation Caribbe*, for example. But it is as MARLANT that Newton has the responsibility for a series of 'leadership tasks' for the entire Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), including force generation and readiness and what he referred to as warfare 'evergreening,' responsibilities which keep the Admiral's eyes fixed firmly on the horizon. In Newton's view, readiness (the process of turning people into ship's companies) and updating and modernizing technology and concepts ('evergreening') are inextricably linked, with the one affecting the other.

For Newton, readiness is key to the unique contributions the RCN makes to Canada's defence: flexibility and geographic range. For example, frigate HMCS *Fredericton*, deployed as part of NATO's Standing Maritime Forces Group 2, was able immediately to answer Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg's call to combat human smuggling in the Aegean, arguably an immense savings of time and effort as opposed to having to create this capability from scratch. Newton also pointed to the NATO-led naval blockade of the former Yugoslavian (in support of a United Nations embargo) that sought to de-escalate the Balkans crisis in the early 1990s as an example of the tailored response that naval forces can provide. Canada was able to participate in that mission in no small part due to having the necessary ships and personnel at the ready. To build on this success, in his tenure Newton has aimed to ensure that the RCN's readiness policies and current standards are the most suitable for the navy's evolving missions. Readiness plans and policies are multi-layered, time-lagged, dense and often externally-driven, subject to numerous 'authors' and their agendas. Newton is concerned that this complexity has made it possible for inefficiencies and redundancies to creep in, such that the readiness level called for no longer matches the actual mission and deployments the RCN is today carrying out. Better empirical evaluation of the policy is needed, and Newton intends to get this policy overhaul started under his watch.

Beyond readiness *policy*, Newton is keenly involved in the broader readiness revolution that the introduction of the AOPS has begun within the RCN. Perhaps the navy's most vocal Arctic advocate, Newton's enthusiasm for these ships, and what they will bring to Canada and to the RCN itself, is evident. His already forthright demeanour became even more animated when asked about the challenges and opportunities of preparing the navy for its new Arctic roles. He was quick to stress that the AOPS represent an entirely new class of capabilities, not merely the replacement of existing ships. As well, he noted that although the RCN has had a summer presence in the Arctic for more than 10 years, the AOPS will allow for new, and increased, cooperation between the RCN and civilian agencies in areas such as scientific research, safety at sea, indigenous community support and transportation.

It is clear that the Admiral feels that the Canadian public has not been made aware of the advantages – and challenges – of the AOPS and their Arctic operating environment, nor of how the RCN intends to capitalize on them. To this end, Newton described some of the preparation and training already underway to ready the RCN to utilize these new ships in the most effective way. One great example of this? The search for the Franklin expedition's long-lost ships *Erebus* and *Terror*, which burst into the public consciousness in 2014 when then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that *Erebus* had been found after years of federally-funded searching. Sensing my skepticism at this suggestion, Newton expressed dismay that the partisan politics, media grandstanding and infighting among the many different research agencies involved had overshadowed the important training opportunities the mission afforded the RCN. In 2013, the RCN provided remote-sensing technical assistance to the underwater archaeology team, and in 2014 the Maritime Coastal Defence Vessel (MCDV) HMCS *Kingston* participated directly in the search mission in the Victoria Straits. Another MCDV participated in the 2015 expedition that revisited *Erebus* and searched again for *Terror*.

Newton described the many different aspects of Arctic readiness it has been necessary to consider before the AOPS are introduced to the RCN fleet. He expounded on how the *Erebus* mission had enabled personnel and equipment to be tested: divers working in frigid waters under sea ice, for example, or coordinating with the many different government agencies the responsibilities of which overlap in the Arctic. Even the everyday operation of a ship at sea is different when in unfamiliar waters, especially since the RCN is contributing to the accumulation of new hydrographic and navigational data in the Arctic. All of this is, in effect, Arctic domain familiarization, Newton explained, and essential preparation for the RCN to be able to 'hit the ground running' when the first ship of the AOPS-class comes into service.

Newton's commitment to innovative AOPS 'pre-readiness' includes finding opportunities for RCN sailors to join the Arctic trips of other agencies, consultation and exchanges with other Arctic-capable navies, and a deliberately 'out of the box' approach to thinking about the other (and oft-neglected) AOPS mission, *offshore* operations. The size and shape of the AOPS allow for a number of different payloads, and Newton sees few limits to the usefulness of these to Canada. Medical supplies, a field hospital, hydrographic equipment, unmanned vehicles, an enhanced boarding team, or even evacuees – the AOPS should be able to transport them all, faster than an MCDV and more cheaply than a frigate, adding to the flexibility at the heart of the RCN's advantage.

RCN Fleet Diving Unit (Atlantic) Clearance Diver, Leading Seaman James Rolfe, keeps a close eye on the video feeds and communications with divers during a dive of the wreck of HMS ***Erebus*** *from the Sir John Franklin 1845 Arctic expedition during* ***Operation Nunalivut*** *on 14 April 2015.*

While mum on the issue of what other platforms he'd like to see added to the RCN's fleet, Admiral Newton is bullish on what the AOPS will bring to the table. And he is hopeful that the government of Justin Trudeau – and perhaps more importantly, the Canadian public – will recognize these future capabilities and use them to the fullest extent possible. The disconnect between what the RCN does, and what the public *thinks* it does – if the public thinks of the navy at all – is clearly of great concern to Newton. Some of his excitement at the introduction of the AOPS might be in no small part due to the public palatability of their potential missions: humanitarian assistance, for example, or Arctic sovereignty assertion, the latter of which is likely set to become more pertinent if conflict with Russia increases. And while HMCS *Harry DeWolf*, the first AOPS, is not likely to join the fleet while Admiral Newton is MARLANT (his turnover is expected in 2017, the ship in 2018), the focus on readiness to which he has committed himself will continue apace, out of the public eye, but leaving a lasting impact on the RCN nonetheless.

Andrea Lane is Deputy Director of the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, and a PhD student in Political Science at Dalhousie University. She spoke to Admiral Newton on 2 March 2016, in Halifax.