A Conversation with Rear-Admiral Dan McNeil, Part II

On Monday, 9 May 2005, Dr. Dan Middlemiss and Mr. Peter Haydon of the Canadian Naval Review Editorial Board talked to Rear-Admiral Dan McNeil, Commander Maritime Forces Atlantic. This is the second part of that interview. Part I of the interview appears in Volume 1, Number 2 (Summer 2005).

HAYDON
In terms of material resources, what is the top of your priority list? If you had your wish list, what would you say is number one after people?

MCNEIL
My number one priority would be to change the process to make things more do-able and manageable. We’re so bureaucratic and process-driven from the centre now it’s hard to get things done. You could even give us the cash and it would still be hard to get things done. The limitations are, yes, human resources, but the limitations are also the risk-averse climate. How are we going to get a medium-lift helicopter in a short time-frame? How are we going to get a “big honking ship” in a short time-frame? How are we actually going to build and put together this main contingency task force? We’ve got all the bits and pieces now but the process is the most difficult part. And that’s part of command and control and a better understanding of force generation. And I now know that these action teams are not working independently. They understand perfectly well that you can’t do the command and control part without looking at the force generation part.

HAYDON
Do you think that any one piece of equipment is more important than any other, either to be replaced or to be acquired?

MCNEIL
Yes, the Joint Support Ship is a great enabler.

HAYDON
This is the “honking great ship”?

MCNEIL
No, they are separate. The Joint Support Ship is going to bring a certain level of amphibious capability and transport for the army. The “honking great ship” is also extremely important because I think it will lead to the ultimate amphibious, marine-like capability for the Canadian Forces. But in terms of joint support, the JSS is – and everybody should be clear about this – different from the “big honking ship.” The reason it’s different is the JSS cannot support the mass of soldiers that we’re talking about with the contingency task forces. At best, I think we can get the equipment and resources for about 200-250 soldiers on one of those ships, when in fact we have the need for anywhere from 800 to 1,200, potentially 1,500.

MIDDLEMISS
I know this isn’t your job really, but there was some discussion a year ago when the JSS first came that the navy was holding out the option for five rather than three.

MCNEIL
Well, of course you’re quite correct, this is not my area of responsibility right now, other than if I am offered the opportunity to provide advice to the Chief of Maritime Staff, who will consider this advice in conjunction with a lot of other advice from the Armed Forces Council and the Defence Management Committee. But, anyway, we always thought a minimum number of ships to do the job was three. A better number was four. And if we’re serious now about the marine-like capability and the Canadian Forces working together, then maybe the number...
is five, six, or even seven. And maybe this “great honking ship” is just a temporary vehicle. That’s the way I’d like to think about it. And, you keep moving forward with the JSS concept and that’s how the Canadian Forces is going to be integrated and unified.

MIDDLEMISS
Are there operational considerations from your standpoint here? For instance, are there difficulties of marrying a high-readiness task group with a sea-lift requirement?

MCNEIL
That’s why the JSS is not the “big honking ship.” The JSS right now is the AOR replacement, fleet support vehicle prioritized for fleet support, which by the way, can carry (in lane metres) a whole bunch of equipment for about 200-250 soldiers. So, you can solve the problem with another class of ship, or you can help solve the problem with maybe more JSS. Then you’ve also got to start looking at the lifecycle costs and manpower costs for running the ship and all those other things. And maybe the answer is one or two more JSS and some temporarily leased Ro-Ros.

HAYDON
You are just finishing the refit of the AOR, but how much longer do you see that ship being useful?

MCNEIL
Preserver and Protecteur will continue to be extremely useful until the new ships are actually operational.

HAYDON
Will be you be working some of the new, evolutionary concepts into the new ships?

MCNEIL
I think we should. I think we will. I think we can start graceful degradation of some of the old capability and try to introduce the new. As a commander of Protecteur, I have a good appreciation for what it and Preserver can and cannot do. And you know, I think they use 15,000 tonnes of their total 22,000 tonnes for fuel, which means there’s not much volume there to do much more. It’s very constrained in what you can actually do.

HAYDON
Would you ever get to the point in a future exercise, a MARCOT ’06 or MARCOT ’08 for instance, that you would go to one of the shipping lines and saying, “I want to lease one of your smaller Ro-Ro vessels and use it for three months to practice and conduct a full exercise”?

MCNEIL
Absolutely. I believe that there are companies out there that have ships that are useful. And I believe that if we put forward a proposal and offer the opportunity for these companies to come and tell us what they have or what they can do, there is wonderful opportunity to do just that.

HAYDON
This whole business of using commercial vessels to augment your capability really goes back to the Falklands War in 1982. The way the British exploited the commercial fleets to support that operation must hold some lessons that can be applied to future operations?

MCNEIL
Absolutely. Ships Taken Up From Trade (STUFT) I think they called it. They put liaison officers on those ships. They had a huge job to do with communications to make sure they could communicate with them all.

HAYDON
Earlier, we talked about the Coast Guard and putting naval detachments on to do additional things when they sail. Again, part of the overall evolutionary process might be the generation of communication teams. Do you see them coming out of the Naval Reserve or will they be regular force?

MCNEIL
I think we can make better use of the Naval Reserve. We are already starting to look at involving them more in intelligence programs that we’re running here. So, to use the reserves in that way is sensible. It would be interesting work for them to do. They would enjoy it.

HAYDON
Is it a big problem to call out the reserves? Or is that one of those political problems that has to be dealt with?

MCNEIL
There’s no simple solution. People talk about legislation where we would have legal authority to call out reserves when we needed them. There are many people who are
not in favour of that because they believe it will create more problems than it solves, in terms of employer companies not wanting to have people that may be taken away from them. I lean towards the current system where when the country needs them, under the principle of citizenship, their employers let them go, whether it’s a Manitoba flood or SwissAir crash. That’s what I’m in favour of actually.

HAYDON

We have to ask the submarine question. How do they fit into the whole picture?

MCNEIL

Well, first, I’ll start with the word “essential.” They are an essential part of the big picture. And one of the more pleasing things to me — it’s a small thing but it really pleases me and makes me feel good — is seeing the responsibility for surveillance clearly in the new policy. That was not clear in any previous policy, even in terms of sovereignty in the 1970s. We talked about our responsibilities in this matter, but nobody ever said the Canadian Forces were responsible for the surveillance of the country. The new policy says that. And I’ll tell you we cannot do surveillance in the Atlantic and Pacific and Arctic without submarines. It’s physics. The oceans are not transparent and you simply will not know what’s going on under your waters unless you’ve got a submarine there. Your own submarine. Now, you can say the Americans can look after it for us, but is that what you want? So, submarines are absolutely essential, given the mandate now for surveillance.

Second, when we bought these submarines we always thought it was nice that they had a lock-out capability, they were designed to operate with special forces. But we never thought that we, the Maritime Staff doing the force development, would actually plan on using it. Well, in a post-9/11 world with the National Security Policy, and now the identification in the Defence Policy of Special Forces as an essential component, submarines become more important. You put the Special Forces on top of the surveillance role, and this is even before you go to the nth degree which is a Mark 48 torpedo when the ultimate happens and you want to take somebody out, and it is asymmetric warfare at its best.

I’d match one of our Victoria-class submarines with Mark 48 against anybody’s aircraft carrier. I wouldn’t want to be on the aircraft carrier. I think that the diesel submarine would win. So, right from surveillance, to special operations, to the ability to take out the biggest combatant, submarines are essential for the future.

MIDDLEMISS

That’s still a tough sell.

MCNEIL

Well, we’ve got a whole department to sell. I speak to my American friends and my French friends, and when they talk now about operating somewhere in the world where nasty things are happening, they don’t want to go there until they send one or two of their submarines there first. So, for the main contingency force, anywhere you’re going to send it, you want to send a submarine there for weeks in advance doing signals intelligence, electronics intelligence, acoustic monitoring to find out what the environment is really like. You’re not going to know unless you have a submarine there.

HAYDON

Do submarines have that capability now, or is it something that has to be added?

MCNEIL

This also comes in the area that I’m pushing big time with the new policy of operational security. If you don’t have a platform for submarines, you don’t have capability. The level of signals, electronics and acoustic intelligence that we’re going to put into them, we’re not going to tell you. But it’ll be there. It’s there to a certain extent now, but we’re going to get better.

HAYDON

There are interesting stories of the Americans learning to use their nuclear submarines in surveillance and reconnaissance roles. They are singing the praises of some of the electronic equipment and robotics they have.

MCNEIL

I talked to the US amphibious group commander last November and he told me he’s got a submarine attached to his task force, and that’s how he uses it. It goes on ahead and does all the surveillance and intelligence and sends all that information back before he’ll move those valuable amphibious ships anywhere near where they need to go. You can do a certain amount with satellites, you can do a certain amount with Special Forces, but the submarines are now an essential part of that package.
We’re sensing the environment before we go in harm’s way.

**HAYDON**
So the quicker they’re back to sea, the better.

**MCNEIL**
Absolutely.

**HAYDON**
When’s that going to take place?

**MCNEIL**
There were a couple of articles over the weekend that I didn’t like about submarines. In one of them a local reporter said, “you have to have an accident before you think about submarine safety? What’s wrong with you people?” Well, excuse me but we are deep into the submarine safety world with this regime we inherited from the Royal Navy based upon nuclear safety and risk management and it ties us to this engineering cycle of refits that is inflexible. I couldn’t get Windsor to sea until the middle of May, because she’s locked into this cycle, so, the middle of May it has to be. We’ve got La Groupe aéronaval (GAN) coming here to Halifax in June – this includes the Charles de Gaulle carrier with a couple frigates, a nuclear-powered submarine, Rubis, and one of their support ships. We’ll be operating with the French off the coast with the Americans as well doing some pretty neat operations, and we hope to have Windsor involved in those exercises.

**HAYDON**
There has been a lot of criticism over the years that operations have always seemed to be a secondary factor in the Canadian Forces. Do you think that with the changes being made in your organization, that this is the beginning of a reversal and that operations will now become foremost?

**MCNEIL**
I don’t agree with that. Generally, in terms of the Canadian Forces, during the “management” era there was a general feeling that operations came second, but that was not the case in Maritime Forces Atlantic. That’s one of the reasons why, once again, the Canadian Forces in the Atlantic will be the model for the new structure. When the Cold War ended we did not stop doing operations; we continued doing operations every single day off the coast, whether environmental monitoring, fisheries patrols, or turbot wars. In partnership with Norfolk, but now much more in cooperation with Boston and the United States Coast Guard, we never stopped doing operations. And now in the post-9/11 world, with the broader definition of security, which always existed, this is even more true. I continually tell people that one of the first, most important things I did in the navy when I joined as a sub-lieutenant, was to go out and do a fisheries patrol against a Soviet fleet.

**HAYDON**
You talked about the link with Norfolk and Boston. How about transatlantic links?

**MCNEIL**
They are very strong, very important, and starting with the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre and those transatlantic links, and less so the NATO command and control structure although we’ve got the two MCDVs – Shawinigan and Goose Bay – operating under NATO now in the Baltic. We haven’t broken the NATO connections, but Admiral King said it best when he said to the Senate committee last week that NATO is less a military organization now and more a political organization. It has to do with our change, from where we didn’t do any command and control in the Canadian Forces and let NATO do it, to now when we understand we have to do our own command and control. And this main contingency force is a huge leap forward with that, too, because one of the main pieces of that is that a couple of Hercules in Africa, a couple of ships in the Mediterranean, and the army in Afghanistan, is not going to do it. We’re still piecemealing our forces and not being meaningful on the world stage. A hundred people in Sudan and 170 in the Golan, and 30 in Côte d’Ivoire, and 20 there and 10 here, won’t do it.

**HAYDON**
Is Canada becoming a more independent nation, and less concerned with alliance activity – going into ad hoc arrangements rather than standing arrangements?

**MCNEIL**
That’s interesting. It’s the way of the world now, isn’t it? We all know now that the United Nations is a great organization. It’s altruistic and we love it but it can’t organize anything, and it can’t execute anything. It’s the ultimate bureaucracy. NATO now has, what, 29 countries and building? What’s its relationship to the European Union? The European Union is taking responsibility for Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia and is now talking about taking responsibility for out-of-European operations.

**MIDDLEMISS**
Admiral, this has been great. Thank you very much.