

# Plain Talk: Should the Support Ship Sink?

Sharon Hobson

Has the Joint Support Ship (JSS) become a naval chimera? It's been about 15 years since the navy started planning for a multi-function support ship as a replacement for its three (now two) auxiliary oiler replenishment (AOR) vessels, and there's still no delivery date in sight. Maybe it's time to rethink this project.

Two teams had been selected to participate in the definition phase of the \$2.1 billion project to provide the navy with three ships to support the fleet, provide surge sealift and support forces ashore. The teams, led by Thyssen-Krupp Marine Systems Canada Inc. and SNC-Lavalin ProFac Inc., submitted their bids in mid-March 2008 amidst rumours that the budget allocated by the government was insufficient.

On 22 August 2008, the government's contracting agency, Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC), announced "the Crown has determined that the proposals were not compliant with the basic terms of the Request for Proposals (RFP). Among other compliance failures, both bids were significantly over the established budget provisions."

Vice-Admiral (Ret'd) Peter Cairns, President of the Shipbuilding Association of Canada, rankles at the implication "that if industry had done its job, we wouldn't be in this pickle, and there is no acceptance of whether there might be any culpability on the part of the Crown or the convening agency."

The plans for three multi-function support ships have been reviewed and reworked over the past 15 years while the navy waited for government approval to proceed. It was ostensibly fast-tracked in 2000, but nothing happened. Then the project was formally announced by the Liberal government in 2004, but it still didn't appear to make progress. Finally, in June 2006, the Conservative government, with much fanfare, announced it again, but used the same 2004 budget without including increases to cover the significant escalation in the cost of shipbuilding materials over the intervening years. Consequently, the \$2.1 billion project – of which only \$1.575 billion will go to the shipbuilders – is deemed insufficient.

So the navy still has no ships on the horizon. In the announcement of the cancellation, the Minister of PWGSC, Christian Paradis, maintained that "these vessels



*One option to solve the impending Canadian fleet support problem: HMAS Sirius, a converted civilian product tanker, refuels USS Juneau (LPD 10) during exercises in the Tasman Sea in 2007.*

Photo: US Navy

are a key priority of the Government of Canada." He also said "the Department of National Defence ... [is] currently considering the next steps."

The first step, says Vice-Admiral (Ret'd) Ron Buck, former Chief of the Maritime Staff and Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, who is now acting as an industry consultant, is to validate the requirement. According to Buck, "the assessment the Navy will come to is ... the requirement is valid, the requirement for three ships is valid."

Despite rumours that the government may opt to reduce the number of ships to be acquired, Admiral Buck says "the objective of the project was to ensure that there would always be one of these ships available to do the government's bidding.... [A]nd once you go below three ships, your guaranteed availability drops to something in the high 60s. When you go to three, you get a 98-99 per cent availability."

The ships are to replace the navy's two steam-driven *Protecteur*-class AOR vessels, which are 39 years old, and are increasingly difficult to maintain. Moreover, with many states banning single-hulled tankers from their waters starting in 2010, the navy will find its fleet movements becoming more limited even if it can keep the AORs steaming. The JSS was scheduled for delivery between 2012 and 2016. Cancelling the procurement process could add another two years (or more) to the acquisition, depending on whether the government decides to start the competition from scratch or add more money to the budget and amend the project definition phase.



Photo: DND

*The importance of the AORs to the sustainability of the Canadian Task Groups cannot be over-emphasized. Here, HMCS **Protecteur** refuels HMCS **Algonquin**.*



Photo: US Navy

*This capability was once a “bold and magnificent dream” for the Canadian military! Here, a Harrier AV-8B takes off from the USS **Bataan** during exercises.*

One concern that Admiral Buck has is that while the government’s announcement said it was “committed to procure, repair and refit vessels in Canada,” it did not say the ships would be built in Canada. As Buck says, “I believe it’s very important for the government to clarify that.”

Getting the government to clarify anything these days is next to impossible. The government – and unfortunately, the military too, either as reluctant captives or eager accomplices – does not appear to believe in an informed public. In contrast to the high-profile announcements of the serial starts to the JSS program, the PWGSC announcement of the cancellation was released to the media at 8:30 pm on a Friday night.

To deal with nosy reporters who persist on following up on the matter, various senior defence officials and analysts were provided with prepared ‘Talking Points’ to use in response to annoying questions. So, for example, if someone were to ask “what is the impact of this announcement on the navy?” the naval spokesperson is expected to say,

Of course we’re disappointed, but we’re also strongly encouraged by the Government’s commitment to equipping the Canadian Forces. We will assist the Department in every way we can to help identify the options to Government for moving forward.

If the questioner asks “What will the navy do now?” the response should be “We will continue to do what we do best, which is to prepare for successful operations both at home and abroad.”

And when the question is “What happens if the navy is compelled to retire *Protecteur* and *Preserver* before they are replaced?” the answer is “We would deal with that issue in the same way we are managing comparable risks today – just as the Air Force has done with the Sea King helicopter – and with equal confidence in the skills and dedication of our people.” (Nice redirect to the Canadian Air Force’s problem child, by the way.)

Do the spinmeisters really believe that people will be satisfied with such drivel? Do they believe that the reporters and the public are so easily manipulated that they will get caught up in a version of ‘Support the Troops’ cheerleading and not notice that they weren’t given any actual information? Why not tell the truth? Tell us that the navy will either have to stay home more, or will have to look into leasing some commercial tankers to get them through the next few years. We can handle it.

There needs to be a discussion of the navy’s support ship requirements and what the options – and implications – are for this project. Those options include starting the whole project from scratch, reducing the number of ships, or calling for entirely different ships, perhaps a next generation AOR and a separate sealift ship, either bought or leased.

Given the current mess, it would not be impertinent to suggest that the navy rethink putting so many functions into one platform. In addition to the problems inherent in trying to design a completely new class of ship with a budget that’s too small, it is easy to see operational problems arising when the ship is required for different tasks, in different areas of the world, at the same time. Who will get priority? As well, a ship that provides naval task force support and strategic sealift, as well as in-theatre, sea-based command and control and joint/combined force support, will make a high-value target for enemy attacks.

Understandably, there are senior officers and bureaucrats who would not want to revisit this issue. No one likes to admit they have spent more than a decade chasing what turned out to be nothing more than a dream, but given the navy’s pressing needs, and the collapse of the current procurement process, they need to suck it up and accept the need to re-assess. 🍷

*Sharon Hobson is an Ottawa-based defence analyst and Canadian correspondent for **Jane’s Defence Weekly**.*