Making Waves

A Necessary Capability
Brian Wentzell

In a 2012 interview in the Canadian Defence Review the Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), Vice Admiral Paul Maddison, revisited the need for a ‘Big Honking Ship’ for the Canadian Forces. The RCN’s Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Mark Norman, using almost identical words, made the same case for a ship designed to participate in humanitarian operations and disaster recovery – describing the ship as “an ideal platform for joint action across a range of relatively permissive expeditionary scenarios.” Both Admirals thought that this vessel could become the principal diplomatic asset of the Canadian Forces.

Is this a realistic idea in light of the serious budgetary pressures facing the federal government? Does this idea undermine the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS) that underlies the Canada First Defence Strategy? More importantly, is this a capability that is consistent with Canada’s national interests?

Canada’s national interests include protecting national security, the security of North America, and traditional social, economic and defence relationships with allies. The national interest also includes maintaining international relations through the United Nations, NATO, the Organization of American States, and bilateral agreements. With Canada’s growing population based upon large-scale immigration, the country has an interest in supporting countries that have been the primary source of immigrants. The Caribbean Basin, Middle East and Indian Ocean regions have provided many immigrants in recent years displacing traditional European immigration. Most new Canadians are conscious of their roots and retain strong relations with their countries of origin. Therefore, Canada has an interest in alleviating suffering when disasters strike, including earthquakes, storms, famine, political strife, war, or economic and social failure. In extreme cases, military intervention as part of an alliance or coalition may be necessary. In less extreme situations the Canadian Forces may still be tasked by the government to undertake humanitarian operations. The RCN has a role to play across this spectrum.

In providing humanitarian assistance, one has to define carefully the navy’s role, the concept of operations and the logistics required to sustain the capability. Vice Admiral Maddison emphasized that he envisages the capability to be used in a relatively permissive environment such as the 2010 humanitarian assistance mission to Haiti, not a military assault on heavily defended beaches. He went on to state that designing new ships with more flexible deck space, larger ship’s boats, more robust command and presumably, aviation facilities would provide important additional humanitarian operation capabilities. This could be achieved by designing these capabilities into the new surface combatant or operational support ships, or both, as they take shape under NSPS.

Amphibious operations are not simple activities in either peace or war. An amphibious capability is not cheap, or easy to implement and sustain. For example, the experience in providing relief to Haiti in 2010 demonstrated the limits of the current destroyer and frigate fleet. These capable warships lacked the means to deliver, over the shore, sufficient supplies, equipment and people needed to address the misery and destruction of a massive earthquake. If HMCS Preserver or Protecteur had been available, the naval capability would have been greater but still limited. The need for a true landing ship was demonstrated. However, unless the government has decided to redefine the new surface combatant or operational support ship proposed under NSPS, there appears to be nothing in the acquisition strategy for such a vessel.

Canada has given thought to amphibious operations in the past. The Integrated Tactical Effects Experiment in 2006 demonstrated the requirements for the landing of an infantry company and its equipment over a beach. USS...
**Gunston Hall**, a purpose-designed Landing Ship Dock (LSD) and a relatively ‘Big Honking Ship,’ supported by a Canadian task group, landed a company from the Royal 22nd Regiment with its vehicles and equipment in a permissive environment. **Gunston Hall** is a combatant ship with a helicopter landing deck and a docking well for landing craft. Normally it would be the smallest of a three-ship landing force carrying about 2,000 US Marines in addition to the ships’ complements. The main lesson from the Canadian experiment seems to have been that Canada would have to invest significant resources to create a credible landing task group and this is beyond its means. Australia, not feeling so constrained, is doing just that.

As the new surface combatant has yet to be designed, there is an opportunity to develop a flexible support ship design such as the Royal Danish Navy’s two-ship **Absalon**-class. This class has the capabilities of a frigate, the ability to accommodate up to a company-size army unit with vehicles or portable medical facilities or a command facility, and a medium helicopter. It has a roll-on/roll-off ramp as well as a landing craft. The concept deserves careful study. It could equip the Canadian Forces with a landing capability in a semi-permissive environment.

New Zealand has taken a different tack. The Royal New Zealand Navy has acquired HMNZS **Canterbury**. She is a multi-role vessel based on a civilian short sea ferry, the MV **Ben-my-Chee**, operating in the Irish Sea. **Canterbury** can carry 250 crew and passengers and is equipped with two medium landing craft, one Seasprite helicopter and has a ramp to facilitate over-the-dock loading of equipment. It can provide command and communication services, medical support and transport up to four medium NH 90 helicopters. It can serve as a training and patrol ship, and supported disaster recovery operations in the February 2011 Christchurch earthquake.

Canadian friends in the Caribbean Basin have recurring exposure to hurricanes, earthquakes and the illegal drug trade. With this in mind, the government can make a strong case for the Canadian Forces to continue counter-drug operations and to develop humanitarian operations and disaster relief capabilities that are extendable to the Caribbean.

Today the Canadian Forces depend upon functional infrastructure to access an operational area. The RCAF, which has airlift capabilities, requires suitable, albeit austere, airfields for humanitarian operations. Without an over-the-shore landing capability, the RCN needs a functioning port for effective use of its ships. Unfortunately, Haiti had very limited airfield availability and virtually no functioning ports after the earthquake. Improvisation and help from the US Navy offset the shortage of port facilities and the lack of Canadian over-the-beach capabilities, and initiative permitted the air force to improve a short airfield for limited operations.

Canada also needs to respond to domestic disasters. While New Zealand is a small country, Canada has three long and remote coastlines. The West Coast has a high threat of earthquakes while the East Coast has severe weather events. The north is sparsely populated and has very limited facilities. There is justification for two, not one, humanitarian operation and disaster recovery ships. One would be based on each coast and one should be available.
as a high readiness unit. The ships could be inspired by either *Absalon* or *Canterbury*. The ships require military features to permit either independent operation or use within a Canadian task group or international force. If necessary, the Canada First Defence Strategy and NSPS should be adjusted to address such high-profile operations and support Canadian national interests. Such a focus will enhance Canada’s international presence and reputation, and these new ships would be a source of pride for all Canadians.

Without diminishing the value of the response to the Haitian earthquake, Canada’s most successful amphibious operation was the assault on Juno Beach on 6 June 1944. In memory of those members of the RCN, Canadian Army and RCAF who served in that operation, I suggest that the first ship be named HMCS *Juno*. As a reminder of the sacrifice such operations may bring, the second ship should be named HMCS *Dieppe*.

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**Criticism for the Sake of Criticism**

Peter Haydon

Every now and again the volume of public chatter on Canadian naval policy rises because of some new incident or revelation that, for some, brings into question the need for robust naval capabilities in Canada. This chatter is not limited to submarines, although submarines are a sure-fire guarantee to raise the blood pressure and the level of rhetoric. Lately, the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS) has become the target of public criticism by a core of self-styled experts who, it seems, criticize for the sake of criticizing rather than offer constructive criticism of the strategy. Worse, many of these comments are based on incomplete and inaccurate knowledge of the basic facts. This should not be surprising given that many of those who criticize naval programs do so to further their own agendas. Unfortunately, the media continually listen to the dissenting voices over other opinions.

That said, however, the government and the Naval Staff do not always explain new programs and their rationale as clearly as they could. Part of the problem is political but part reflects an annoying institutional inability to explain complex policy issues in easily understood language. The private sector, on the other hand, has provided several succinct explanations of Canada’s strategic need for a versatile and robust navy, all of which are readily available on the internet. One would think that by now there have been more than enough public explanations of the NSPS and the related strategies to entrench the basic arguments.

Let me restate a simple fact that seems to escape the critics, the experience of past RCN shipbuilding programs, especially the *Halifax*-class frigates, tells us that it takes 12-15 years to design and build a new warship in Canada. It follows that approval in principle is but the first step in a lengthy process that eventually sees the approval of designs for new ships and the provision of funds to begin cutting steel. There are many stages between the initial political announcement and the first industrial activity. The NSPS, like earlier shipbuilding programs, has a long, complex road to travel before new ships begin to take shape.

Admirals and their staffs know that every assumption, every piece of strategic rationale, and every cost projection will be scrutinized by an army of bureaucrats and accountants before any shipyard gets the go-ahead to start building a ship. The relatively simple process of ‘design and build’ is long gone, and the contemporary, convoluted, procurement gauntlet established by the Treasury Board is fraught with political obstacles. This should not be surprising. Politicians and senior bureaucrats are wary of change and only commit to new concepts after intense evaluation unless, of course, the proposal has Cabinet-level origins such as Defence Minister Paul Hellyer’s 1964 radical force restructuring. Moreover, Canadian politicians are invariably risk-averse and thus reluctant to commit public funds to projects that cannot be seen immediately by the public to be in the national interest.

Naval procurement during the Cold War was innovative as the Naval Staff attempted to keep pace with emerging anti-submarine warfare technologies and an increasingly sophisticated Soviet submarine threat. Nonetheless, it was often difficult to impress on politicians and generals that for the RCN to remain relevant it had to modernize. For instance, plans for the acquisition of modern submarines were rejected time and time again for petty rather than strategic or economic reasons, and concepts for general-purpose frigates with air-defence missile systems were similarly rejected despite the commitment of RCN ships to areas of high air threat.

The submarine procurement program of the early 1960s is an example of the government’s difficulty in coming to grips with a force requirement that made strategic sense...
but was difficult politically because of misperceptions of the value of the submarine in modern warfare. This myopic view persists today.

Politicians always demand maximum flexibility (to keep their options open) for minimum cost. The 1994 Defence Policy Review is one example: in its quest for new ideas the government had the opportunity to choose between a cheap, paramilitary coast guard and a more expensive, traditional navy. The latter carried the day because it had operational flexibility whereas the coast guard option did not, but that conclusion was not reached easily.

The Canadian patrol frigate HMCS *Halifax* (FFH 330) transits the Caribbean Sea en route to Haiti, 18 January 2010. Initially much-criticized, this class of ships has since gained widespread acclaim.

However, it is bureaucrats who scrutinize the proposals on behalf of their political masters and this invariably introduces the agendas of other departments into the approval process. As a result, bureaucrats need to be brought on side early in the procurement process – the cost of not doing this is enormous. The 1987 Defence White Paper included a proposal to buy 10-12 nuclear-powered submarines, but despite the military strategic logic of the concept, DND failed to get the support of other key departments, especially External Affairs, and the resulting inter-departmental squabble eventually led to divisions in Cabinet that assured the demise of the program.

In view of the intensity of the politics, it should be no surprise that it takes far longer than ideal to design and build a new warship in Canada, and almost certainly takes longer than in most other major maritime states. That need not be an insurmountable obstacle to innovation, but it does make gaining political support for new ideas more difficult. The successful Canadian admirals are those who have understood the axiom 'politics is the art of the possible.' In terms of Cold War force planning, Admirals Harold Grant, Harry DeWolf and Ken Dyer understood this and were able to read the political situation and propose shipbuilding programs that fell into the political comfort zone and were approved with relative ease. Experience from both successes and failures over the years shows that when the best and the brightest officers form the Naval Staff, the navy as a whole invariably benefits. But even they can have their hands tied by government-imposed constraints on public discussion. This makes the role of institutions such as CNR, the Naval Association of Canada and the Navy League of Canada in the public debate on naval policy all the more important. But to be useful, criticism and comment needs to be constructive and informative.

Hopefully, those who contribute to CNR adhere to the founding concept of the journal that constructive criticism of the policy process is both useful and necessary, and that idle criticism for the sake of criticizing has no value. Throw-away comments or comments made to further an individual or institutional agenda rather than address the facts do not help the public understand what is invariably a complex issue. More importantly, criticizing the navy for the perceived shortcomings of a particular piece of maritime security policy shows a lack of understanding of the overall policy process in Canada. The navy is no more an independent actor in the defence policy process than farmers are in shaping agricultural policy. The Prime Minister’s Office, Treasury Board, Public Works Canada, and many other government departments make inputs to major policy decisions laid before Cabinet.

Not understanding the unique and complex Canadian policy process is not an excuse for poorly reasoned public comment, nor is it an excuse for publishing controversial comments as a way of gaining a market advantage.

Notes

1. This quotation is attributed to Otto von Bismark as Die Politik ist die Kunst des Möglichen in August 1867.
first installation in the park was the Battle of the Atlantic Memorial. It is a series of 24 granite stones, each engraved with the name, hull number and date of loss of an RCN ship during the Battle of the Atlantic. The stones are placed along a steep hillside in chronological order. Information panels along the base of the hill give visitors the story of each ship and crew. The memorial was dedicated in May of 2010.

As Remembrance Day 2010 approached, there was a desire to honour those represented in this memorial, without detracting from the official ceremony at the city cenotaph. The result was a poppy placing ceremony a week or so before Remembrance Day – it is called the Reflection Project. At the Memorial each stone commemorates a ship and the men who perished with her. To honour these men a single poppy for each life lost is placed alongside that ship’s stone. Some stones have a few poppies while others have well over 100. The view of the memorial hillside as it turns red with poppies is overpowering as you realize each poppy signifies an individual sacrifice.

As the 2012 ceremony approached the thoughts of HMCS Prevost turned again to those members of the ships’ companies who had perished. It was decided to acknowledge them by placing a small framed photo at the appropriate stone. Some stones have a few poppies while others have well over 100. The view of the memorial hillside as it turns red with poppies is overpowering as you realize each poppy signifies an individual sacrifice.

“This is an aggressive undertaking by HMCS Prevost,” said Lieutenant Commander Iain Findlater, Commanding Officer, “but the end-state of almost 1500 young faces reflecting from the hillside will be incredibly moving. We owe it to them. This will help us remember that these were young men with families, with friends, with hopes and plans and dreams which were all ended too soon.”

To locate, copy and frame a photo of everyone lost is a monumental task. The 2012 poppy placing featured the first 50 photos. It is hoped that by next year the majority of photos will be found and placed. To do so HMCS Prevost needs help. They are calling on every Royal Canadian Legion, every Naval Reserve Division, local Books of Remembrance, Navy Leagues, newspaper archives, surviving family members, etc. If you have a photo of a RCN sailor who perished in the Battle of the Atlantic, please contact HMCS Prevost (hmcsprevost@gmail.com).

The Reflection Project is truly a reflection on all of us.

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