

Canada's "Newfyjohn" Tenancy: The Royal Canadian Navy in St. John's, 1941-1945

Bernard Ransom

Volume 23, numéro 2, spring 1994

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad23_2art03

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Ransom, B. (1994). Canada's "Newfyjohn" Tenancy:: The Royal Canadian Navy in St. John's, 1941-1945. *Acadiensis*, 23(2), 45–71.

BERNARD RANSOM

Canada's "Newfyjohn" Tenancy: The Royal Canadian Navy in St. John's, 1941-1945

"THE RCN IN ST. JOHN'S WAS something like a tenant living rent-free in a house which he himself had designed, of which he paid for the upkeep and in which members of the landlord's family were welcome to take shelter".¹ This reflection on the Royal Canadian Navy's wartime presence in St. John's was published in 1952, only three years after Newfoundland entered Confederation. Since that time scholars have only slowly turned their attention to studying the Canadian impact in Newfoundland during the Second World War.² The war brought an unprecedented prosperity to Newfoundland, through the major investment and expenditures associated with elaborate American and Canadian naval, military and air bases developed after 1941. By the time Newfoundland was plunged into debates about the country's future at the end of the war, it has been argued, the wartime experience had "strengthened the relationship between the island and the mainland, and in general had created a climate in which Confederation could be seen as an attractive option".³

During the Second World War Newfoundland occupied a vital position in the North Atlantic theatre of operations. The protection of supply lines to a beleaguered Great Britain became a priority for Allied naval strategy and resulted in the formation of the RCN's Newfoundland Escort Force in 1941. From the outset, the RCN faced the enormous challenge of providing from scratch workable logistic support for this new fleet in a location remote from its established Atlantic bases. As the Battle of the Atlantic intensified, the escort fleet experienced serious operational problems resulting from equipment and training shortfalls. Its Newfoundland base in St. John's exhibited similar flaws in repair and maintenance capability, berthage and drydock service and in almost every aspect of technical support. These difficulties would never fully be surmounted despite substantial investment by Canada in port facilities and naval installations in St. John's, which by 1944 amounted to more than \$16 million. Politically, Canadian economic and strategic commitments gained recognition of its special interest in the defence of Newfoundland from its United States and British allies. Moreover, as

1 G.N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada* (Ottawa, 1952), II, p. 192.

2 For recent discussions of this theme, see Malcolm MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent: The Impact of Canadian and American Bases in Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1986), David MacKenzie, *Inside the North Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation, 1939-1949* (Toronto, 1986) and Peter Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (Kingston and Montreal, 1988).

3 James Hiller, "Newfoundland Confronts Canada, 1867-1949", in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Fredericton/Toronto, 1993), pp. 374-80.

Bernard Ransom, "Canada's "Newfyjohn" Tenancy: The Royal Canadian Navy in St. John's, 1941-1945", *Acadiensis*, XXIII, 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 45-71.

Canada's wartime involvement in Newfoundland deepened, the Canadian government itself became more aware of the place that Newfoundland occupied in its interests.

In the first week of the European hostilities which opened the Second World War, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King declared the security of Newfoundland to be integral to that of Canada.⁴ Although pre-war British governments were directly responsible for Newfoundland affairs, they lacked the means for its defence and had come to count upon Canada to provide minimal naval and air covering forces for the territory in time of war.⁵ Recognition of the strategic interdependence of Newfoundland and Eastern Canada was axiomatic in Canadian staff appreciations of the late 1930s.⁶ This informal division of responsibilities suddenly acquired urgent importance as the Anglo-French allies lost the continental campaign in the spring of 1940. By the end of June, France had submitted to a separate peace and a militarily weakened Britain faced invasion and defeat.

This prospect, together with the British government's desperate concession of base facilities in western hemisphere dependencies (Newfoundland included) to the United States in exchange for destroyers for the hard-pressed Royal Navy (RN), sharply focused Canadian attitudes. Should Britain fall, Canada would face inevitable heavy Axis attack in a situation of politically compromising military dependence upon the United States. Anxious about the dangers of Canada becoming a virtual U.S. protectorate, the King government committed significant naval and military resources to the defence of Britain that summer. This was both sound strategy and a means for preserving the traditional Canada-Commonwealth link which balanced U.S. political influence at home. The parallel move toward a hemispheric defence arrangement with the United States (the Permanent Joint Board on Defence) further ensured that Canada was treated in a fully sovereign manner by its American neighbour.⁷ In this context, Newfoundland — Canada's gateway to the Atlantic and host to major new American defence installations — became a geo-political priority.

For Mackenzie King and his cabinet, assertion of Canadian suzerainty over the Newfoundland theatre would become the prime concern within the strategic-

4 King, in House of Commons, 8 September 1939, in P.A. Bridle, ed., *Documents on Relations between Canada and Newfoundland, I* (Ottawa, 1974), p. 43.

5 Dominions Secretary to Secretary of State, External Affairs, 21 October 1938, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 27. Asst. Undersecretary of State, Dominions Office to U.K. High Commissioner, Ottawa, 21 October 1938, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 28.

6 Memorandum, Joint Staff Committee to Minister of Defence, "Defence of Canada - Atlantic Coast", 5 April 1938, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), History Directorate, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa [DHist.].

7 Roger Sarty, "Mr. King and the Armed Forces", unpublished paper, contains a good discussion of the defence-sovereignty issue in the context of Cabinet-Defence Staff relations. For the policy perspectives within the leadership of the governing Liberal Party, see W.A.B. Douglas, "Democratic Spirit and Purpose: Problems in Canadian-American Relations, 1940-1945", in Joseph Jockel and Joel J. Sokolsky, eds., *Fifty Years of Canadian - United States Defence Co-operation: the Road from Ogdensburg* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter, 1992), pp. 31-57.

diplomatic "triangular"⁸ relationship with the senior U.S. and British allies. This claim would eventually assign Dominion forces the chief strategic responsibility in that theatre: protection of the North Atlantic convoy supply route. It would be as principal defender of convoyed shipping in the North West Atlantic that Canada would assert an independent strategic role vis à vis its senior allies: this undertaking would, in turn, commit her naval service to the creation and operation (under conditions of acute wartime crisis) of a major new specialist anti-submarine force to be based at St. John's, Newfoundland — "Newfyjohn", as the port became known in the Royal Canadian Navy. The total scale of the task, as well as the Canadian share of it, would exceed all Allied naval expectations: the speed of escort vessel procurement, manning and deployment had to be breakneck, leaving inter-allied matters of finance and status of shore support facilities as *ad hoc* arrangements for a later final accounting. At the service level, this massive essay in naval extemporization would entrust to the hitherto marginal Royal Canadian Navy a major component of Canada's war effort.

Over the winter of 1940-41, as British anti-submarine countermeasures became more effective in home waters, the German U-boat command utilized new base facilities on the Breton and Biscayan coasts of occupied France to extend its range of attack westward across the North Atlantic. In late May 1941 the British Admiralty decided trade protection across the entire ocean shipping route was essential and decreed that a Western escort force for convoy work in the North West Atlantic must be organized without delay in Newfoundland.⁹

A strategic requirement for substantial anti-submarine "light forces"¹⁰ deployed from a new base at St. John's was wholly unanticipated and represented a hard re-education for the Lords of the Admiralty in long-forgotten lessons from the 1914-18 war.¹¹ Interwar naval doctrine — both in the RN and RCN — had focused on trade protection by means of long-range cruiser patrols along imperial shipping routes, the aim being to counter the enemy surface raiders which were seen as the exclusive threat.¹² Newfoundland did figure briefly in this pre-war scheme, there being a plan for a cruiser refuelling and turn-around station in St. Mary's or Mortier Bay on the

8 A descriptive term which has become standard nomenclature in this field of study since J.B. Brebner's *North Atlantic Triangle* (New York, 1945). See also S.W. Dziuban, *Military Relations between the U.S. and Canada* (Washington, 1959), pp. 55-85, and MacKenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle*.

9 Minutes of a meeting, chaired by the Vice-Chief of Naval Staff, RN, Whitehall, London, 20 May 1941, re "Basing of an Escort Force on St. John's, Newfoundland", ADM 116/4387, DHist. ADM refers to the United Kingdom Admiralty Records, of which copies are held at DHist.

10 Admiralty Minute Series M.09406/41 re St. John's Escort Base, Minute of 25 June 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

11 A.J. Marder, "The Influence of History on Sea Power", in *From the Dardanelles to Oran* (London, 1974), pp. 33-63. For a Canadian perspective, see M. Hadley and R. Sarty, *Tin Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders, 1880-1918* (Montreal, 1991). A recent specialist survey of the issue is in D. MacGregor, "The Use, Misuse and Non-use of History: the RN and Operational Lessons of the First World War", *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (October 1992), pp. 603-15.

12 Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars* (London, 1976), Vol. II, p. 226.

island's South Coast.¹³ With the 1938 German declaration to achieve submarine parity with the RN, and intelligence reports of the transatlantic capability of the expanding Nazi U-boat arm, the Admiralty took a hard look at the needs for convoy defence and anti-submarine warfare. As the European diplomatic situation deteriorated — notably with the precautionary mobilization for war ordered during the Munich crisis of September 1938 — Admiralty chiefs put in hand emergency mass orders for destroyer-escorts and “educational” contracts for small anti-submarine steam vessels suitable for mass production in commercial yards unused to building to exacting naval standards. Although the RCN was prohibited from following suit with such “educational” orders in Canadian shipyards by a cost-shy government, it was clear that its own future anti-submarine policy would be similarly makeshift.¹⁴

By the spring of 1941, it had become clear that the RN and its allied navies again faced a campaign of attrition with the U-boat — a “Battle of the Atlantic” similar to the submarine war which had almost starved the United Kingdom into surrender in 1917. Naval planners now had to scramble to perfect the logistics and fully provide the means which had proved themselves in the earlier conflict, notably comprehensive conveying of merchant shipping and large numbers of specialist anti-submarine escort vessels and patrol aircraft. The predictably problematic results of such a crisis-driven policy adjustment were exacerbated in the RCN by its phenomenal wartime expansion ratio of around 55:1 (compared with the U.S. Navy's 20:1 and the RN's 8:1). Hence, from the outset, the Allied anti-submarine effort, and especially that of the RCN, would be typified by makeshift vessel types, by improvised equipment and support facilities, by training and manning flaws and by uneven standards of preparedness and performance.

Immediately following the Admiralty's determination of the need for end-to-end escort coverage for the Atlantic route, the Canadian naval staff volunteered to operate the new escort force with all available suitable RCN ships and as a distinct command under a senior RCN officer.¹⁵ The Admiralty was gratified to accept the offer and requested that Commodore L.W. Murray, RCN, then on a staff appointment in the U.K., be named Commodore Commanding the new force¹⁶ which would be designated the Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF).¹⁷ At the time of NEF's formation in May 1941, the RCN's escort vessel resources were moderate indeed. Destroyer strength stood at 12: six modern fleet destroyers purchased from the RN in the 1930s, with an additional six First World War vintage U.S. ships acquired as part of the Churchill-Roosevelt deal of the previous year. The distinctive but aged American “four-stackers” lacked the endurance for reliable transatlantic performance without extensive modification. The workhorse of the new force would be the single-screw steam corvette, the stop-gap anti-submarine vessel

13 Admiralty Minute Series M.09406/41, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

14 Roger Sarty, “The Origins of Canada's Second World War Maritime Forces, 1918-1940”, unpublished paper, p. 16-17.

15 Secret Message #2108Z, NSHQ, Ottawa to Admiralty, 22 May 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

16 Admiralty to CNS Ottawa, Message 1520B/24, 24 May 1941, NEF 8440-70, DHist.

17 Admiralty to CinC (WA) etc., Message 2322B/28, 28 May 1941, NEF 8440-70, DHist.

rushed into emergency mass production in British and Canadian commercial yards in 1939-40. Originally conceived as a coastal patrol vessel, the mass impressment of RN and RCN corvettes into transatlantic operations was perhaps the most striking indicator of the way pre-war policies had ill-prepared the service for the convoy war. By May 1941, the RCN had commissioned 29 of these diminutive escorts and anticipated deploying a further 15 by August: more would be assigned to NEF as they were completed and fitted out but, as an additional commitment, Canadian Naval Service Headquarters (NSHQ) offered to assume responsibility for all shore support required by NEF in Newfoundland.¹⁸

The British interest in establishing such a base of operations, even as a stop-gap measure, is self-evident. It was a straightforward matter of national survival through protection of seaborne supplies. That the Canadian War Cabinet would so readily commit to an apparently open-ended major investment in Newfoundland in early 1941 raises more profound questions. The seriousness of that commitment is well-indicated by Canada's own suggestion that, should it be decided that Canada bear the full cost, its only condition was that Canada retain title to the fixed assets involved.¹⁹ The proposal shows the extent the King government was prepared to go in support of its geopolitical ambitions in Newfoundland: expenditures on the St. John's escort base would parallel others in train for garrison needs in Gander and St. John's and new RCAF facilities at Gander (to say nothing of the major development of the Torbay aerodrome near St. John's approved later that year). With preparatory work for the U.S. bases, bilaterally arranged with the U.K. under the 1940 deal then underway, some kind of significant counterweight to maintain the Canadian presence probably seemed timely. From this point, it is clear Canada felt obliged to maintain her stated preserve in Newfoundland vis à vis the U.S. in terms of expenditures on fixed assets as well as in jurisdictional and service command matters.

It has been argued that Canadian intentions toward Newfoundland at this time were consciously imperialistic.²⁰ Although the members of the King cabinet were divided on the issue of absorbing Newfoundland and the prime minister himself remained plagued by the *political* implications of adding an additional economically dependent province, the determinant factors in the official Canadian attitude — beyond the security question — proved to be the "logic" of completing the Dominion "sea-to-sea", strong desires from the U.K. for such a resolution and the lack of U.S. political ambition in the matter.²¹ Certainly wartime security concerns

18 NSHQ Ottawa to Admiralty, Telegram 1626Z/29, 29 May 1941, GN 38 S-4-2-3 (4), Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador [PANL] (St. John's); Minutes, Naval Council, 26 May 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 563; Minutes, Cabinet War Committee, 27 May 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 564.

19 U.K. High Commissioner, Ottawa to Dominions Office, London, Secret Telegram 973, 23 June 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

20 H. Blair Neatby, review of C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, in *Canadian Historical Review*, LIII, 1 (March 1972), p. 75.

21 For a sustained discussion of Mackenzie King's attitudes and quandaries in the question, see Raymond B. Blake, "WLMK's Attitude Towards Newfoundland's Entry into Confederation", *Newfoundland Quarterly*, Vol. LXXXII, No. 4 (Spring 1987), pp. 26-37.

were sharpened by the situation of political interregnum in the territory. The repercussions of the international financial crash of 1929-30 had gravely weakened Newfoundland's capacity to meet scheduled payments on her public debt — a situation which became acute by 1933. In order to avoid a public default, the U.K. had directly underwritten the outstanding debt, but had also suspended the constitution and replaced the elected government with an appointed six-man Commission of Government answerable to London. Clearly, with the fate of the U.K. government seriously in the balance in 1940-41, the political situation of Newfoundland, administered by an interim imperial cabal, was very much open to question. Newfoundland and Canada had been in a currency union since 1895 and strong elements of the Canadian economy (notably banks and extensive mining interests) had established themselves in the smaller Dominion before the war. Ottawa was now poised to make massive investments in Newfoundland on wartime projects. The development costs of "Newfyjohn" alone would be \$16 million Canadian by 1944; elaborate air and military facilities would require more than twice as much again. There is perhaps something of a classic imperial relationship here, and on this reading, Confederation with Canada in 1949 could be interpreted as a final adjustment between "flag" and "trade".

If this suggestion appears overdrawn, it remains to make something else of the Canadian veto of the Newfoundland Commission's offer in July 1941 to apply substantial funds from its anticipated 1942 surplus on current account directly to the escort base project.²² This surplus, which totalled almost \$7 million Canadian, was the first fruit of restored fiscal health for Newfoundland resulting from the Canadian and U.S. "base-building boom".²³ The official Canadian position as stated to the U.K. Dominions Office was that such unilateral Newfoundland action would simply increase the indebtedness profile of the Sterling Area in an unacceptable manner.²⁴ As Canada was already a major U.K. creditor (a \$1 billion Canadian line of credit had been arranged in 1940) and Canadian and Newfoundland currencies circulated at par in St. John's, this reasoning was opaque to the responsible British officials.²⁵ They had been advised of the Commission's wish to remit any remaining surplus revenues directly to the U.K.'s foreign exchange reserves (which is exactly what was done with the "blocked" Canadian dollar amount in the fiscal year 1942-43). Hence, from the British (i.e. the foreign exchange) perspective, the expressed Canadian concern appeared an "as short as it is long"²⁶ non-distinction. The real problem appears to have been political: Ottawa wished to pre-empt any Newfoundland government move to take an independent

22 Governor of Newfoundland to Dominions Office, Secret Telegram 367, ADM 116/4387, DHist.; E.A. Seal in Admiralty Minute Series M. 08662/42, Sheet 2, para. 3, ADM 116/4540, DHist.

23 Peter Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World*, p. 144; David MacKenzie, "An Economic and Financial Review of Newfoundland during the Second World War", *Newfoundland Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 1992), p. 71.

24 U.K. High Commissioner, Ottawa to Dominions Office, London, Telegram 1031, 8 July 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

25 A. Millar to H.N. Morrison PAS (S), Admiralty, Whitehall, 1 January 1943, ADM 116/4540, DHist.

26 See Millar to Morrison, ADM 116/4540, DHist.

equity position in new assets created in the local wartime economy. The veto would ensure that Newfoundland remained an economically passive entity within what some Canadian cabinet members were already describing as the "Canadian orbit".²⁷

The reference to Newfoundland and the "Canadian orbit" was made during cabinet discussions on the St. John's base during June 1941. As Prime Minister King and Finance Minister J.L. Ilesley expressed last-minute doubts about major expenditures on a naval base outside national territory and without comfort of legal title, Naval Minister Angus L. Macdonald tabled a memorandum which recommended commitment to the "Newfyjohn" base in unequivocal geopolitical and autonomous war effort terms: "the establishment of this force [NEF], consisting largely of HMC ships, commanded by a high-ranking Canadian Officer and working from a base developed with Canadian funds, gives the Dominion an unprecedented opportunity to shoulder responsibility for fighting half the Battle of the Atlantic, upon the outcome of which so much depends".²⁸ Service ministers combined to oppose the prime minister's doubts, arguing the acute urgency of the strategic need, the importance of the "Canadian orbit" and the view that Atlantic trade protection was "a primary Canadian interest".²⁹

King's caution would appear fully justified in light of a submitted cost estimate of \$10 million for the project, and he scheduled further discussions of the question for subsequent Cabinet War Committee meetings. It was at the final meeting on 24 June the decision was made that strategic imperatives should be given priority and that base planning and construction should proceed, with questions of title and financial responsibility deferred for future resolution. The government's official position for communication to London would be that both title and major costs should be best borne by the U.K., but, if the U.K. government desired, Canada would be willing to assume major capital costs, with comfort of title to all lands involved. Most significantly, from King's perspective, recent intimations from the U.S. administration that it "would welcome Canada taking a more direct responsibility for Newfoundland", was also "an important consideration".³⁰

In the event, granting title, or even a long leasehold, of prime harbourfront property in St. John's to the Canadian government proved politically unpalatable to the Commission. Instead the three governments resorted to the expedient of reserving title or leaseholding to either the Commission itself or the Admiralty: land acquisition and capital costs would be met by the Admiralty, while all operational and maintenance costs would be borne by Canada, which would also staff and supply the new base.³¹ In effect, all of the costs were met by Canada,

27 Cabinet War Committee, Minutes, 10 June 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 571.

28 Submission to Council by Minister (Naval Service), 10 June 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

29 Cabinet War Committee, Minutes, 10 June 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, pp. 569-71.

30 Cabinet War Committee, Minutes, 24 June 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 576; Asst. Undersecretary of State, External Affairs to U.K. High Commissioner, Ottawa, 22 June 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 575.

31 Minute, H.N. Morrison PAS (S) Admiralty, 30 July 1942, Admiralty Minute Series M.08662/42, ADM 116/4540, DHist.

since the Admiralty share had to be charged to Canadian funded credit and, as required, the subsequent Mutual Aid Act. Canadian ministers apparently turned “a blind eye”³² to this circuitous escalation of their own costs, but, having vetoed assumption of such costs by Newfoundland, this arrangement doubtless reflected their primary concern with strengthening Canadian political leverage in Newfoundland.

Canadian soul-searching over the scope of the commitment to such an extra-territorial base, and indeed the scale of actual costs involved, had much to do with the Admiralty’s early radical revision of the planned size of the NEF. At the time of NSHQ’s offer in May to provide the ships and shore support required for the NEF, Admiralty planners envisaged a force of about 30 to 40 vessels with a “fleet train” of one depot/repair ship together with a small number of auxiliary supply ships and oilers: existing harbour wharfage in St. John’s would be utilized as required.³³ By early June and after a re-assessment of the minimal convoy needs in the theatre, the Admiralty revised the desired force size to 70 to 80 vessels.³⁴ Clearly this increased force would require much more elaborate shore support - dockside repair, maintenance and storage facilities, together with proper service infrastructure (utilities, communications, plant and accommodation of every kind). Provision of such needs would necessitate elaborate negotiations between the three parties involved — the Admiralty, NSHQ and the Newfoundland Commission — as well as detailed arrangements to accommodate local commercial interests and the technical difficulties of adaptation to local conditions.

Firmly committed to requisitioning such harbour space and wharfage as it needed, the Admiralty had, from the outset, to address the interests of the local shipping lobby. In 1941 Newfoundland had a sizeable ocean-going mercantile marine, including scores of small modern steamships owned by a dozen or so St. John’s firms which then found gainful and continuous employment on war contract work for the British Ministry of War Transport [MWT]. The same month the NEF scheme was first raised, the MWT effectively intervened with Admiralty chiefs in London to prevent naval requirements in St. John’s from pre-empting the lion’s share of harbour berthing, loading and repair facilities.³⁵ Over the winter of 1940-41 and before any question of an escort base had arisen, shortages of skilled labour and modern equipment had caused serious delays to maintenance and repair work on merchant shipping. The St. John’s agent of the MWT — Eric Bowring of Bowring Bros. Ltd. — attributed such problems to the neglect and parsimony of the Commission, who were also owners of the Newfoundland Dockyard and Drydock.³⁶ This was an ominous complaint: the paucity of docking and repair

32 P.A. Clutterbuck to Sir W. Woods, 14 September 1943, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 623.

33 Minutes of Meetings, Admiralty, chaired by VCNS RN, 20 May 1941 and 22 May 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

34 Admiralty Message 1401B, 3 June 1941 - Register LD 02257/41 and M.09406/41 (4), ADM 116/4387, DHist.

35 Minutes, Meetings of Admiralty and MWT representatives, Whitehall, 30 May 1941 and 25 June 1941, Admiralty Minute Series M.08662/41 - re St. John’s and Halifax, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

36 E. Machtig to Foley, copied Admiralty (Trade and M branches), 14 June 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

capacity in St. John's would prove to be a chronic and ultimately insurmountable problem for the "Newfyjohn" base.

A joint Admiralty/MWT mission arrived in St. John's in early June 1941, charged with finalizing the legal and technical details of the escort support operation in a manner which made adequate provision for timely merchant ship repairs. Headed by E.A. Seal, a senior official from the British Admiralty Delegation in Washington,³⁷ mission members consulted widely with officials of the Commission, RN and RCN officers on station and corporate management of port and shipping interests. It was confirmed that the required onshore maintenance, storage (more than 50,000 square feet) and accommodation (for 1,100 all ranks) buildings would have to be new construction, there being no suitable ones available for long-term lease. But the mission's most intransigent problem was finding adequate berthing for the vessels of the NEF and the local defence force expected to be in harbour at any one time. Using a rule-of-thumb estimate for this to be about 25 per cent of the total, the need would be somewhere over the 20-vessel mark. Suggesting a general scheme of dredging and rebuilding of requisitioned commercial wharfage, mission technical advisors found space for two dozen escorts and an equal number of auxiliary craft. Considering this to be "saturation", they opined that this level of development would preclude routine mercantile operations and, additionally, necessitate construction of an "overflow" anchorage facility in Harbour Grace.³⁸

Seal's estimate for capital outlay was a conservative \$5 million to be a charge on the British Admiralty as outlined above. In accepting the burden of development costs (through use of Canadian dollar credits), together with operational and maintenance charges, all without comfort of title, the Canadian War Cabinet formally declared its assumption that the Dominion's "vital interest" in the fixed assets created would merit "special consideration...in the general postwar settlement".³⁹ Clearly the settlement referred to was likely to be of a scale involving economic, industrial and even jurisdictional changes of major scope. Admiralty insensibility to the depth of the Canadian commitment to this "vital interest" in Newfoundland, gave the diplomatic Seal some vexatious moments. The MWT delegation quickly came to a cost-sharing arrangement with the Newfoundland Commission to upgrade facilities for merchant shipping in St. John's, including improvements to some Northside commercial wharfage and to the Newfoundland Dockyard.⁴⁰ The Admiralty quickly moved to conclude a similar bilateral venture on the proposed naval facilities,⁴¹ apparently either unaware of or indifferent to the stated position of the Canadian government that direct Newfoundland public

37 MWT to E. Bowring, 31 May 1941 and Henderson to Schofield, 31 May 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

38 Reports, R-Adm. Sheridan and Adm. Bonham-Carter to NOIC, St. John's, dated 5 June 1941 and 4 June 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25, II (1), DHist.

39 Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 15 July 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 585.

40 Admiralty to U.K. High Commissioner, Ottawa [for Seal], ADCAN 775, 20 July 1942, Draft, Dixon to Morrison, 8 July 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

41 Admiralty M. Branch paper M.011271/41, 20 July 1941, Governor of Newfoundland to Dominions Office, Telegram 367, 16 July 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

expenditure in base financing was totally unacceptable. When Whitehall actually approved Commission expenditures on the base project,⁴² Seal acted to rescind the order⁴³ and had to scramble to ensure that no word of the deal reached the Canadian Cabinet. That such a revelation would appear to the Canadians as “slick dealing”⁴⁴ displays just how sensitive Ottawa was about protection of its perceived rights in Newfoundland.

The Admiralty conceded the point on use of Commission funds and also acquiesced in arrangements made by Seal and NSHQ whereby Canada’s Department of Munitions and Supply would manage the required land acquisition and construction contracts.⁴⁵ Perhaps understandably, Admiralty perceptions of interests and positions taken by the parties to the Newfoundland venture lagged behind the substantive arrangements made on the spot by their representative. The British Admiralty Delegation, like the other similar missions established in North America by the British government in the embattled days of 1940, did at times evince an attitude of an agency “in-exile”, ready to fulfil its mission in a radical and independent manner. From the Canadian perspective, it has to be said that the involvement of the Washington-based British Admiralty Delegation as lead agency in the Newfoundland project focused all related issues within the context of U.S.-Canadian continental “rivalry”. Furthermore, the Admiralty’s drive to establish an escort base in Newfoundland occurred within the context of the American-British (Staff) Conversations [ABC-1], which had produced far-reaching strategic agreements in March 1941 and from which Canada was excluded. The ABC-1 protocol was originally scheduled to take effect when the U.S. entered the war, but it was actually implemented in the aftermath of the Roosevelt-Churchill meeting in Argentia Bay in August 1941. Under its provisions the U.S. Navy (USN) would exercise command control over all “allied” operations in the Western Atlantic. This would assign the RCN a subordinate role with limited coastal defence and Atlantic convoy duties. The resultant sense of unequal partnership with the (still non-belligerent) U.S. further hardened Canadian attitudes to their rights in the defence of Newfoundland.

Although the final U.K.-Canada agreement on the St. John’s base development was not formalized until October 1941, NSHQ had seized the initiative on the detailed planning of “Newfyjohn” from the time of the arrival of the Admiralty mission. By early June, Captain G.L. Stephens, Engineer-in-Chief of the RCN, was already preparing a blueprint scheme. He seems to have felt he was attempting to match urgent need with unpromising circumstance: “St. John’s harbour and city cannot be considered as normally suitable as a base for a large naval force but, as circumstances make its use essential at the present time, certain restrictions must be accepted and...it will only be possible to develop it within certain limits and at

42 Dominions Office to Governor of Newfoundland, 19 July 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

43 High Commission of U.K. (Ottawa) to Governor of Newfoundland, Secret Telegram 32 [Seal to Woods], 22 July 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 587.

44 See Seal to Woods, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 587; Seal to Markham (ADCAN 1105), 23 July 1941, ADM 116/4387, DHist.

45 U.K. High Commission, Ottawa (from R-Adm. Sheridan) to Governor of Newfoundland, Telegram 35, 29 July 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, pp. 588-9.

considerable cost".⁴⁶ Stephens proposed extensive dredging, new piling and widening of wharf properties along the harbour's Southside. Together with suggested "infill" new work between existing wharfage, this would give approximately 5,300 lineal feet of usable berth space. On the northwest angle of the harbour, immediately adjacent to the Newfoundland Dockyard, he identified capacity for a further 2,000 lineal feet of jetty space in sectional "finger"-type wharfage: this would have to be entirely new construction and, like the Southside jetties, would be dredged to a 20-foot standard depth and built out to a minimum width of 30 feet. On a then little-used and derelict group of commercial sites immediately behind the new "fingers", Stephens proposed construction of a small naval dockyard. On this four acre block of downtown St. John's between the harbour front and Water Street, he estimated that, after site clearance, there would be sufficient space for the main naval stores, torpedo and ordnance depots and repair shops capable of carrying out limited corvette refits as well as repairs on larger classes of destroyer escorts. A site adjacent to the Newfoundland Hotel was earmarked as location of a proposed Naval HQ-cum-Officers' Mess. On a more negative note, Stephens could find no suitable site for a naval barracks within a one-mile radius of the harbour. He further observed that a chronic shortage of skilled labour fully halved the optimum productivity of the government drydock, and he sensed this factor would not be improved. Stephens' estimate of capital and land acquisition costs was much higher than Seal's, being the "not less than \$10 million Canadian"⁴⁷ already communicated to the Canadian cabinet. The one unavoidable compromise of Stephens' scheme was the requirement that certain of the more active mercantile proprietors had to be allowed continued access to their Southside wharfage in the interests of the commercial life of the port. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that something in excess of 7,000 lineal feet of jetty space could be found in a harbour supposedly seriously congested and on whose traffic the entire population depended for an extensive range of imported necessities. Such an adjustment is a striking testament to how much of St. John's harbour's capacity was effectively moribund in 1941.

NSHQ planners rounded out Stephens' scheme with proposed purpose-built fuel tankage and underground magazine space on the Southside, together with a 1,000 man barracks (in the city's West End) and a new 250-bed naval hospital to be built just east of the naval HQ building. Two Port War Signal Stations at Fort Amherst in the Narrows and at Cape Spear, with a radio station on the high ground south of the city, completed the base plans.⁴⁸ Standard RCN construction plans could be utilized in the case of the hospital, mess, storehouses and barracks, thus permitting rapid start-up of site work; other plans could be readily drawn up from sketch requirements. However, building starts on much of the new wharfage, the fuel and magazine sites, would have to await completion of full engineering surveys.⁴⁹

46 Report, Engineer-in-Chief to CNS, Ottawa, 9 June 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

47 See Report, Engineer-in-Chief, 9 June 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

48 Minutes, Base Planning Committee NSHQ, 23 June 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

49 Report, Lt. A.W. Jeckel RCNVR to Base Planning Committee, NSHQ, 29 July 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

The Admiralty hesitated to give its full approval to the RCN plan, most likely because of fears of possible adverse repercussions on U.S. naval escort forces deployed in the theatre.⁵⁰ Naval Minister Angus L. Macdonald himself emphasized in discussions with Seal that Canada had the political will to assert her defence rights in Newfoundland against any U.S. pressures. Seal cabled his superiors from Washington that “Canadian Minister for Naval Service definitely informed [me] at Ottawa that Canadian government were anxious to see scheme proceeded with, *despite possible American intervention*”.⁵¹ Macdonald pushed the plan through Treasury Board and Cabinet during the month of August. It was agreed the Canadian government would advance the capital funds immediately required and that its officials would oversee the letting and supervision of construction contracts.⁵² Formal approval for payment of the ongoing maintenance and administrative costs of the base followed at a meeting of the Cabinet War Committee on 2 October 1941.⁵³

Thus, with commendable despatch given the diverse interests and nature of the participants, preparation and construction work commenced at the main sites in late August and early September 1941. Design and construction standards remained the preserve of RCN (especially RCNVR) specialists, while questions of property acquisition and title (processed by the Newfoundland Commission on an agency basis for the Admiralty) were executed by Canadian officials monitored by Seal and his officials. The standard structures of the naval HQ, barracks, hospital, dockyard buildings and the smaller radio and signal station projects made best progress. The radio station was ready by January 1942 and the signal stations were completed the month following: the hospital was completed in April, while the HQ, dockyard and barracks buildings (the latter commissioned as HMCS Avalon) were occupied in June and July 1942. Work on the dockyard jetties and the greater part of the Southside wharfage was finished in August and September. By that date, as was expected, excavations in the granite of the Southside hill for the magazines and fuel tankage were still in progress.

It is noteworthy that such a large-scale disturbance within the commercial life of the port and broad range of property acquisition for naval use proceeded with despatch and without protest. This is especially remarkable in light of predictions by British Admiralty Delegation advisors that such a scale of development would render the harbour “saturated” and preclude routine commercial activity. There had certainly been nothing by way of preparatory discussion about the needs of the new base, either with local government or with businesses likely to be affected: “Newfyjohn” was simply called into being by the *ukase* of Admiralty signal in late May 1941.⁵⁴ Such latitude was afforded British authorities by certain local

50 Tucker, *Naval Service*, II, p. 193.

51 British Admiralty Delegation to Admiralty (Telegram 200R/19), July 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

52 Minute of Privy Council (Canada) 48/6379, 19 August 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

53 Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 2 October 1941, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 592.

54 Admiralty to NOIC, St. John's and CNS, Ottawa (Signal 1940), 23 May 1941, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

economic realities, notably the recent loss of markets for the Newfoundland fish export trade. The Depression years had seen a substantial reduction in international demand for Newfoundland's salt-cured cod exports, and the outbreak of war itself had cut off traditional markets in the Axis-dominated Mediterranean. This had an inevitable deleterious effect on mercantile assets and activity in St. John's. Depressed property values meant the Admiralty could pick up certain items for purchase relatively cheaply, while leaseholds on major undeveloped lands (such as the barracks and hospital sites) were minimal in cost. The Southside wharfage was generally leased on a "peppercorn" basis of minimal rent in return for disturbance and the often very substantial improvements made by the RCN to what were actually marginal, if not moribund, commercial sites. Indeed, such compensation became so valued by proprietors that many of them, as hostilities wound down in 1945, declined early termination of their agreements rather than recommence "normal" commercial activity forthwith.⁵⁵

By the fall of 1941, with initial shoreside developments then building and the 70 or so escorts of NEF operational with the aid of specially tasked support ships, Admiralty chiefs could be well satisfied with the "stop-gap" trade protection system they now had in the Western Atlantic and with the increasing share of the escort burden being shouldered by the RCN. Newfoundland constitutional realities and Canada's Atlantic area ambitions had virtually returned the Admiralty by surrogate to the strategic capability of its 18th-century naval regime in the theatre; while the Commission acted as its political and leasing agent, the RCN had become its operational arm. All of this was, however, merely a temporary arrangement, until such time as the American ally fully assumed its planned role in the Western Atlantic.

This combination of "stop-gap" logistics with an unequivocally cardinal strategic role gave the St. John's base an incongruity of tone which persisted throughout the war years. In the early period of operations Commodore Murray's staff functioned from requisitioned upper floors of the Newfoundland Hotel, while the vessels of the NEF in harbour crowded the narrow Southside jetties or were trot-moored mid-stream. Those in need of serious running repairs had to lay alongside HMS Greenwich, a modern machine shop-equipped depot ship, while fleet supply ships on station provided naval stores (RFA City of Dieppe) and fuel (the oilers Teakwood and Clam). As one Canadian officer of the NEF observed, "Although Newfyjohn was a naval base of world significance, it wore a curiously impermanent air, like a travelling tent-show ... Unlike the army and air force, both with big, permanent installations, the navy at St. John's seemed to operate out of its hat..."⁵⁶ In the beleaguered days of 1941-42, the NEF truly was the creation of an Admiralty whose resources were stretched almost to breaking point — a cohort of auxiliaries led by regulars in bartered vessels. The desperation and poignancy of this reality are well expressed in J.B. Lamb's abiding image: "a professional RN Lt-Commander is our Senior Officer and he leads the parade as he takes us out to

⁵⁵ Correspondence, miscellaneous Southside proprietors, February-May 1945, GN 13/1/B (20), PANL.

⁵⁶ J.B. Lamb, *The Corvette Navy* (Winnipeg, 1979 [1977]), p. 92.

sea: five Canadian corvettes and a Juicer four-stacker, a typical mid-ocean escort group in this winter of 1941-42".⁵⁷

In this first winter of operation, the NEF had absorbed practically all of Canada's ocean-capable escorts and, with a more than 75 per cent Canadian presence in its 70-odd vessel force, had become the RCN's premier commitment in every measurable way. Murray's promotion to Rear-Admiral (assuming the title "Flag Officer, Newfoundland" [FONF]) in December 1941 made the raw new command equal in rank weight to that of the RCN's Commanding Officer, Atlantic Coast [COAC], situated in the long-established base at Halifax, Nova Scotia. In these early days when every newly-commissioned RCN escort was routinely sent to FONF for employment and Halifax deployed only a small coastal defence force, Murray might well and aptly declare that "The reputation of the RCN in this war depends on the success or failure of the NEF..."⁵⁸

During the feasibility planning for the St. John's base, the major concern for naval technical officers was finding adequate berthage for the number of escorts required, but once the NEF was operational drydock capacity became the new, limiting difficulty. From the outset, naval vessels enjoyed priority access to the large graving dock operated by the government-owned Newfoundland Railway. This concession was made at the direct expense (and aggravation) of the shipping interests, whose deferred needs meant loss of time and earnings while damaged vessels waited in harbour. In the period November 1941 to March 1942, warships occupied an average of 14 days out of the 24 worked by the dock each month — close to 60 per cent of its capacity.⁵⁹ That March the docking capacity issue was raised diplomatically by Commission members speaking for the local shipping interests with C.J. Burchell, Canada's newly appointed High Commissioner to Newfoundland.⁶⁰ Burchell personally took the lead in the matter, brokering the interests of the Commission and the RCN and arranging for visits to St. John's by American drydock experts to assess the type and siting of a suitable "relief" naval rail slipway.⁶¹ FONF engineering staff and American consultants produced plans for a 3,000-ton marine railway capable of handling all classes of escort vessel then in use, destroyers included, with related accommodation and workshop support.

The chosen site was Bay Bulls, an undeveloped but naturally well-protected anchorage just south of St. John's. In 1941-42, as in the naval wars of the 17th and 18th centuries, this harbour was heavily used by merchant vessels awaiting convoy. Harbour Grace, Captain Stephens' original recommended site for port improvement to handle the "overflow" from St. John's, was rejected by NSHQ, probably because of the extensive capital work it would require to protect its anchorage from heavy running seas. To the satisfaction of all parties, the Canadian

57 Lamb, *Corvette Navy*, p. 21.

58 Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run: the RCN and the Battle for the Convoys* (Penguin, 1990 [1985]), p. 64.

59 Chief Engineer (Newfoundland) to NOIC (Newfoundland), 27 March 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

60 Burchell to Woods, 18 August 1942, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 604.

61 Burchell to Secretary of State (External Affairs), 16 March 1942, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 596.

cabinet approved the Bay Bulls project in July 1942, for a total cost of \$3 million (\$2 million capital for the haul-out and support facilities; \$1 million for provision of anti-submarine netting and baffles in the harbour). Terms of occupancy were a 99-year lease, held by the Government of Canada, with staffing and operational responsibilities to be assumed by the RCN.⁶² The Newfoundland Commission of Government committed \$300,000 to the project, in part through acquisition of the site itself, and stipulated only a nominal rent. Use of the site in wartime would be for any purpose connected with the war effort, while postwar use was to be limited to naval operations only.⁶³ The general construction contract was let in the early fall of 1942,⁶⁴ but final completion of the facility was not anticipated before the end of 1943.

While pressure from the local shipping lobby was thus instrumental in initiating a marine railway haulout for the NEF, a parallel effort to secure a floating dock for St. John's was undertaken by the British Admiralty Delegation. As 1942 progressed, it became painfully clear that the drydock factor was an absolute constraint on the full utilization of the port for escort purposes. The fall months of 1942 saw a staggering rise in naval usage of the graving dock. Accounting for 36 days of a total of 48 worked by the dock that September and October, H.M. ships used 75 per cent of total available docking time (the comparable figure for 1941 was 27 per cent).⁶⁵ Moreover, during the winter of 1942-43, FONF engineering staff observed a marked increase in docktime-demanding repairs for hull damage, especially with the 20-year old ex-USN "four-stack" destroyers on station. A further limiting factor was that it was general practice in St. John's to dock two vessels simultaneously (since the size of the graving dock permitted it). Even when the Bay Bulls slipway was completed, however, it would handle only one vessel at a time and so could not by itself achieve more than 50 per cent of the St. John's dockyard's capacity.⁶⁶

The impact of the drydock crisis in St. John's becomes apparent when seen in context of the actual numbers of escort vessels then operating with the NEF. The escalating naval demands on drydock time throughout 1942 were felt during a period of real decline in the size of Murray's command. From a peak of around 70 ships in January 1942, numbers fell to about 60 by mid-year and to around 50 by January 1943.⁶⁷ Concerned about the implications of these statistics, the British Admiralty Delegation struggled to find a floating dock for St. John's in Canada throughout 1942. The closest unit of appropriate type was the smaller section of the

62 Burchell to Woods, 18 August 1942, in Bridle, *Documents*, pp. 604-5.

63 Dominions Office to Governor of Newfoundland (Secret Message 640), 26 November 1942, ADM 116/4540, DHist.; Woods to Burchell, 24 August 1942, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 606; Burchell to I. Wild, 18 May 1942, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 600; Woods to FONF, 14 July 1942, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 604.

64 Governor of Newfoundland to Dominions Secretary (Telegram 47), 24 October 1942, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 604.

65 Report on Repair Facilities at St. John's, Newfoundland, Chief Engineer to NOIC (Newfoundland), 27 March 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

66 Report on Repair Facilities, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

67 See Tucker, *Naval Service*, II, p. 203; Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, pp. 97ff.

Vickers Montreal Dock (200 feet long, with a 7,000-ton lifting capacity). But FONF's chief engineer had been turned down by NSHQ in his request for its removal to St. John's in the fall of 1941. The basic reason given for this decision was the overriding priority given new construction by the Canadian naval staff. The repair issue remained in their minds of secondary importance by far.⁶⁸ From an operational perspective, this was strenuously opposed by the Admiralty and MWT, who jointly supported the move again (unavailing) in the fall of 1942.⁶⁹ Murray himself was widely known to be on the verge of outrage over this neglect of his force's repair needs.⁷⁰ By the fall and winter of 1942-43, perceived critical deficiencies in naval repair capacities of Canadian yards, together with persistent complaints about effectiveness problems in the RCN escort fleet, were causing grave anxiety within the Atlantic commands of the RN and USN.⁷¹ While the official RCN view remained that all that could be done was being done,⁷² the base chief engineer in St. John's reported a situation of unacceptably long delays for escorts awaiting docking service and a consequent very high incidence of missed sailings by badly-needed ocean escorts.⁷³

The main problem was that the makeshift capacities of the St. John's base — extemporized as an emergency measure in mid-1941 — were subjected in 1942 to unanticipated burdens. "Newfyjohn" would prove to share the flaws of the RCN escort fleet it maintained: both were stop-gaps kept at first-line service for too long in their unimproved state and, not surprisingly, both were found wanting by year's end. The first year of active U.S. belligerency, 1942, brought the reverse of expected relief for the RCN and RN escorts on the North Atlantic run. The losses at Pearl Harbor and the consequent heavy demands of the Pacific theatre led to a virtual disappearance of the USN from North Atlantic convoy routes. This in turn led to removal of RCN vessels from the NEF (now re-named the Mid-Ocean Escort Force [MOEF]) for convoy duties further south. The reduced units of the MOEF maintained Atlantic convoy schedules only through acceptance of undesirable operational and logistical expedients. Operationally, stricter adherence to the most direct, time-saving Great Circle routing meant less flexibility to avoid U-boat concentrations through extensive detour. Meanwhile, team cohesion and continuity were prejudiced by higher rates of vessel substitutions within escort groups. Logistically, unavoidable shorter lay-overs in port created morale problems and

68 Correspondence between MWT, Admiralty M Branch (Morrison) and Admiralty Trade Division (Schofield), 16 October 1942, ADM 116/4540, DHist.

69 Admiralty M Branch to NSHQ, 24 October 1942, and NSHQ to Admiralty (Message 1532/20), 26 October 1942, ADM 116/4540, DHist.

70 E. Bowring to MWT (Telegram 2306), 27 October 1942, ADM 116/4540, DHist.

71 Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, pp. 167, 193, 250. For a detailed discussion of the effects of neglecting repair capacity in favour of new construction in Eastern Canadian yards, see E.R. Forbes, "Consolidating Disparity: The Maritimes and the Industrialization of Canada during the Second World War", *Acadiensis*, XV, 2 (Spring 1986), pp. 3-27.

72 Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, p. 193.

73 Report, Chief Engineer (Newfoundland) to NOIC (Newfoundland), 27 March 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

higher rates of repair defects, especially in the hard-pressed and marginally equipped support facilities of St. John's.

The strategic direction of the war effort also spotlighted the flaws of the RCN escort fleet and of its St. John's base. The Allied commitment to an invasion that fall of (Vichy) French North Africa (Operation Torch) as a prelude to opening a second front in Europe, necessitated an intense build-up of materiel and manpower in the U.K., supplied from North American sources over the vital Atlantic convoy lifeline. Furthermore, beyond Torch, lay the enormous requirements for the cross-channel invasion of continental Europe (Overlord), initially planned for late 1943, but later deferred to mid-1944. So critical was the security of the North Atlantic convoy route to these pivotal strategic concerns, that defeat of the U-boat would be given absolute priority at the Allied summit meeting at Casablanca in January 1943.

These new strategic departures of 1942 were accompanied by the worst-ever shipping losses in the North Atlantic. In 1940 and 1941 the U.K. lost around 4 million tons of merchant carrying capacity in each year, but in 1942 this doubled to almost 8 million tons. The U-boat fleet's effectiveness was then boosted by deployment of new wartime construction vessels at a time when the Allies removed escorts from mid-ocean tasks for use in Torch (FONF alone lost 16 escorts). The Allies were additionally handicapped by their inability to decrypt the new German naval command cipher "Triton", which was penetrated only in January 1943.⁷⁴ By year's end the ocean-borne supply crisis was acute. In jeopardy were adequate supplies of foodstuffs, raw materials and fuel for the U.K.'s domestic needs, to say nothing of the priority allocations for Operation Torch or the outlook for Overlord.⁷⁵

The impact of the supply crisis on the RCN escort fleet suggests an admixture of summary attempts to address real problems and of calculated, inter-service manoeuvre. The British Admiralty unequivocally identified the flawed performance of RCN vessels as a prime cause of failure in the North Atlantic. Canadian escort groups, it stressed, although convoying a little under half of the trade volume, had suffered fully 80 per cent of merchant shipping losses recorded in the catastrophic months of November and December 1942.⁷⁶ It was a purported low standard of training — and, by implication, of tactical leadership — within RCN groups which the Admiralty viewed as critical. Such was the blunt message relayed personally by Churchill to Mackenzie King.⁷⁷ RCN staff and operational commanders countered by citing the lack of advanced navigational and detection equipment and of fast, modern destroyer escorts as basic deficiencies which crippled the effectiveness of Canadian groups.⁷⁸

74 W.A.B. Douglas and J. Rohwer, "The Most Thankless Task Revisited: Convoys, Escorts and Radio Intelligence in the Western Atlantic", in J.A. Boutillier ed., *The RCN in Retrospect* (Vancouver, 1982), pp. 187-234.

75 Corelli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely: the Royal Navy in the Second World War* (London, 1991), pp. 573-7.

76 Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, p. 213.

77 Quoted in Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, p. 197.

78 Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, pp. 198-9.

The distinct lines of interpretation for the generally agreed RCN groups' efficiency problems clearly follow partisan interests. The RN wished to argue for a tighter command control (by its own officers) of all North Atlantic escort forces, while the RCN urged the case for remedy through proper equipment to perform the task on an independent basis. The demonstrable command vacuum left by the U.S. withdrawal merely intensified the Admiralty's determination to address the supply crisis on its own terms, and this is what eventuated. With Canadian cabinet concurrence, the entire RCN mid-ocean element was withdrawn in January 1943 for "re-training" at specialist anti-submarine centres in the U.K.; it was later re-committed in March and remained under RN tactical command until May.⁷⁹ Meantime, long-range aircraft were deployed to cover the notorious mid-ocean air gap, aided by support groups of anti-submarine craft with carrier-borne aircraft to supplement close convoy escorts. Together with penetration of the Triton code in January (which permitted accurate location and avoidance of U-boat packs), these measures finally combined to bring the U-boat campaign to a halt.

The Atlantic Convoy Conference of March 1943 confirmed necessary new command arrangements in the theatre in light of effective non-participation by the USN. The RN's assumption of virtual control over convoy defence was recognized by a new CHOP (Change of Operational Control) line located at what would be its farthest point west, 47° W; a new Canadian command zone (Canadian North West Atlantic) was recognized west of 47° W and north of 40° N. Although hailed as something of a triumph for RCN recognition, this new Canadian zone was actually as limited as it could credibly be, reaching only to the tail of the Newfoundland Banks. The full scale of progressive RN jurisdictional expansion westwards is appreciated when seen in the context of an initial USN (RCN) - RN CHOP line at 26° W (mid-1942), followed by a subsequent position at 40° W (November 1942), before the final boundary was set in April 1943 at 47° W. One is driven to conclude the Canadian North West Atlantic Command was, in effect, a re-named vestige of what had been the U.S. zone of responsibility — diminished by mutual agreement between the senior Allies according to their current levels of capability in the theatre. Rather than the national achievement of a navy "coming of age",⁸⁰ we perhaps see an effect of a traditional and subordinating Empire-Dominion relationship within the endlessly subtle miasma of the Atlantic triangle.

In parallel to its recall of Dominion escort forces and limitation of the Dominion's command jurisdiction, the Admiralty next proceeded to take in hand the perceived deficiencies of Canada's prime naval base at St. John's. Recognition of the Canadian North West Atlantic Command had set the seal on a major westward extension of RN jurisdiction, while the training standards argument had permitted the Admiralty to recast the Order of Battle for the entire Atlantic escort fleet to its own specifications. Next, through what would be termed "expansion" of

79 Secret Naval Message 1638Z/7, CNS Ottawa to Admiralty (1st Sea Lord), 7 January 1943, MOEF 8440-6, DHist.; M. Milner, "RCN Participation in the Battle of the Atlantic Crisis of 1943", in Boutilier, ed., *RCN in Retrospect*, pp. 158-174.

80 W.G.D. Lund, "The RCN's Quest for Autonomy in the North West Atlantic", in Boutilier, ed., *RCN in Retrospect*, pp. 156-7.

facilities, the flawed house of "Newfyjohn" would be put in order and its capability enhanced to a serious and credible level for the first time.

The Admiralty had impressed the need for expansion of St. John's on naval minister Macdonald in March 1943, and Macdonald obtained cabinet approval, including a new expenditure of around \$6 million, on 7 April.⁸¹ Advised of the strategic need to develop the port "to the utmost" to support Overlord preparations, the Cabinet War Committee, as before, approved the Canadian financial obligations (credit advances to Admiralty account) while deferring issues of title.⁸² While political leaders thus considered "expansion", the actual situation at "Newfyjohn" could only be described as one of a crisis of saturation of facilities and imminent breakdown. By March 1943, the average number of escort vessels in harbour at any one time was around 25, which was the maximum for which berthage could be found under the original scheme of June 1941. Naval ships normally laid over in port for about five days, during which time boiler cleaning and machinery repairs were carried out concurrently.⁸³ In that month alone, the base serviced 143 escorts, of which 11 were docked, and made good 2,300 repair items.⁸⁴ The drydock time used is the critical indicator: to service 11 vessels, with a total of 30 days' docking time, was beyond the normal manpower capacities of the dock and was achieved only by working extraordinary shifts. The chronic shortage of finished men in metal trades (the dock employed only 80 of these key workers at that time) meant that the plant operated well below full capacity.⁸⁵

"Newfyjohn" remained desperately deficient in conventional machine tooling and light engineering plant. Base workshops still lacked the necessary lathes for engineering repairs, while basic smith and foundry work could not be done onshore due to lack of such essentials as power hammers. All such work had to be carried out by the shops and trade personnel of the depot ship Greenwich, a vessel the Admiralty had hoped to remove the previous year, but which had had to be retained in St. John's pending availability of proper equipment for the base workshops.⁸⁶ The Southside machine shop, smithy and foundry complex was described as "very congested and dilapidated...and a fire hazard", while the electrical shop was said to be "poorly equipped...and working under adverse conditions".⁸⁷ On the Northside in the RCN Dockyard, some of the machinery was still served by a temporary power supply: the main switch panel remained incomplete: rectifiers for the mercury-arc welding gear and stand-by generators were lacking; motor compressors had arrived, but there was no power supply for them. The yard lacked the capacity to provide

81 Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 7 April 1943, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 613.

82 Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 7 April 1943, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 613.

83 Report, Chief Engineer (Newfoundland) to NOIC (Newfoundland), 27 March 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

84 Director (Plans) to ACNS, Ottawa, 10 May 1944, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

85 Report on St. John's Repair Facilities by DSR to CNEC, Ottawa, 19 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

86 Minute M.012347/42 and Notes by Admiralty M Branch, 23 September 1942, ADM 116/4540, DHist.

87 Report on St. John's Repair Facilities, DSR to CNEC, Ottawa, 19 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

sustained DC power service for ships undergoing re-fit. As an expedient for temporary supply, technical staff proposed rigging two 60-kilowatt generators which were still in Halifax awaiting trans-shipment. For permanent provision of a DC supply, the purchase of at least two large capacity transformers would have to be initiated.⁸⁸

For RCN technical staff, the departure of Greenwich was something of a consummation devoutly to be wished. Not only did the vessel's continued presence somewhat justify the signal ill-equipment of the shore facilities, but, much worse, there existed considerable ill-feeling between depot ship and shoreside personnel which created a general morale problem.⁸⁹ Work on slipway and site structures for the Bay Bulls facility was proceeding smoothly, but there was much pessimism about its promise. The non-availability of the requisite type and number of machine tools severely limited its potential effectiveness that year. Indeed, with the current short lay-overs of escorts in port (and consequent need for simultaneous boiler cleaning and machine repairs), use of Bay Bulls as planned would likely create its own delays to escort schedules.⁹⁰

If the St. John's base was seriously deficient in conventional plant for electrical, smithy and machine repairs, the provision for repair of the advanced electronic gear required by escorts — radar, HF/DF and ASDIC — was absolutely minimal.⁹¹ In the area of equipment shortages, "Newfyjohn" had much in common with the RCN escort fleet it supported. Deficiencies in state of the art electronic detection and navigational equipment in the RCN are a well-documented and analyzed issue. Reasons advanced for the "equipment crisis" have included poor staff appreciation of current requirements and technology, poor Admiralty-NSHQ liaison in technical matters, the limits of Canadian manufacturing capability and unremitting pressure to maintain a maximum number of operational escorts at sea.⁹² St. John's' own "equipment crisis" in basic conventional repair plant, almost two years after the NEF commenced operations, together with NSHQ's apparently chronic inability to address the floating dock question, suggest weight be placed on human and organizational factors within the RCN. This was clearly the contemporary Admiralty reading of the situation and thus, in early April 1943, Seal and his team from the British Admiralty Delegation again descended upon St. John's to confer with senior NSHQ officials about specifics for the "improvement" of the base.

Seal found a radical change in Canadian attitudes compared with the dealings he had experienced in mid-1941. At that early stage, NSHQ had apparently

88 Report on Repair Facilities, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

89 Report on Repair Facilities, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

90 Report, Chief Engineer (Newfoundland) to NOIC (Newfoundland), 27 March 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

91 Seal to Admiralty, 7 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist. HF/DF: "Huff Duff" — High Frequency Direction Finding; ASDIC: a British-invented acoustic submarine detection device — an early form of sonar.

92 C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-45* (Ottawa, 1970), pp. 315-6; Tucker, *Naval Service*, II, p. 457-8; Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, pp. xi, 216-7. The most recent specialist study of the issues is David Zimmerman, *The Great Naval Battle of Ottawa* (Toronto, 1989).

allowed the British "to call the tune" about support requirements, but Seal now met staffwork prepared "most thoroughly and carefully" and "an agreed Canadian Naval Service plan".⁹³ He advised Admiralty concurrence *in toto* with the scheme on both financial and contingent grounds, emphasizing that "if we refuse sanction, they [the Canadians] will feel humiliated at having to ask sanction from us to spend their own money and will also blame us if in future anything goes wrong".⁹⁴ In actuality, the scheme represented all the obvious concerns relative to logistic supply for Overlord, together with an emphasis on training facilities (as might be expected following recall of the RCN escort groups for acknowledged shortcomings in that area). A third element was enhancement of boom defences, an important local problem highlighted by recent ore carrier torpedoings in the Bell Island-Conception Bay anchorage.

European invasion requirements dictated the port be provided with repair and maintenance facilities which would permit the maximum number of escort vessels the harbour could accommodate, to be turned around with minimum delay. This maximum figure was agreed at 50 vessels, which would be handled concurrently with around the same number of merchant ships — preferably without interference with their repair needs.⁹⁵ Seal himself noted the Dockyard workshops were "not yet in full use" and that the Southside shops were housed in "poor, improvised accommodation". He stressed that "additional [machine] tools on a considerable scale" would be required to implement the full intent of the new RCN plan.⁹⁶ This called for major new construction and reorganization of the base repair capacity: a new machine shop complex on the Southside would house heavy engineering plant, foundry and smithy, while a new naval stores building on an adjacent site at the extreme west end of the harbour would relieve chronic congestion in the already inadequate Dockyard storehouse. It was planned that once all general stores had been removed to the new Southside building, this storehouse would be converted for use as a light engineering-*cum*-electronic shop to deal with advanced navigational and detection equipment repairs. A new two-storey, 11,000-square foot capacity harbour craft/boat repair shop with haul-out was included, as well as an 80-vehicle garage for the existing barracks complex in town. Of these last two items, Seal tersely noted they were considered "essential" by the Canadians.⁹⁷

The increased complement for the expanded base was fixed at an additional 1,500 ratings (mainly tradesmen) and an additional 850 servicewomen (WRCNS and naval nurses; with the latter predominating). The tradesmen were sufficient to "work continuous watches in the care and maintenance of 50 vessels", while the large complement of nursing staff was required for a new RCN 250-bed hospital proposed for construction in the west end of the city on a site adjacent to the Newfoundland government's sanatorium. This second hospital was regarded as

93 Seal to Admiralty, 14 April 1943, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 615.

94 Seal to Admiralty, 14 April 1943, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 615.

95 Director (Plans) to ACNS, Ottawa, 10 May 1944, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

96 Seal to Admiralty, 7 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

97 Seal to Admiralty, 7 April 1943; Report on Repair Facilities, 19 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

essential, since experience had shown the requirement to be five per cent of the base complement and 50 per cent of the "seagoing population". While female personnel would be accommodated in new residences on the hospital sites, the additional tradesmen would require both a small annex to HMCS Avalon and development of a new barracks site on the Southside Hill. The Southside site was deemed necessary despite the obvious construction and servicing difficulties of the terrain: Seal observed that "great importance is attached to having the men near the workshops in this climate". Total complement of the base was now set at 5,000 RCN all ranks, for which accommodation was now in hand for 4,000.⁹⁸

Drydock capacity at St. John's remained a bottleneck which precluded operation to full potential as desired by the Admiralty and MWT. Finally giving up on a Canadian source, Seal reported that "in order to break this [bottleneck] we must get a floating dock suitable for destroyers and below here as soon as possible...the best alternative is a wooden floating dock from the USA, which I will endeavour to procure on return to Washington".⁹⁹ The unavoidable expedient of having the floating dock RCN rather than civilian-manned, had a particular effect in increasing both personnel and shore support requirements for the expanded base. In the event, Seal was successful in his efforts to obtain a floating dock. The USN provided a unit of 1,800 tons lifting capacity from Perth Amboy, New Jersey which arrived on station in St. John's on 14 September 1943.

Even this welcome improvement failed to overcome certain obduracies in the maintenance situation. It could not match the "double-up" capacity of the government drydock by itself; nor could the Bay Bulls facility, which finally came on stream in the spring of 1944, fully resolve the capability shortfall. Working to deadlines of tight escort schedules meant effecting machined repairs during docking and on site and, for Bay Bulls fully to provide such service, it would require extensive duplication of the new machine-shop plant of St. John's. This was precluded by financial realities and, perhaps more importantly, by the intense procurement difficulties regarding such machine tools and plant for Canada's wartime economy. The "ideal" solution favoured by client agencies such as the British Admiralty and the MWT — a special draft of additional skilled labour for the government dock from either Canada or the U.K. to maximize its productivity — was neither feasible nor politically acceptable to the Commission of Government.¹⁰⁰

Onshore training facilities of a comprehensive scope were an important new feature of the expansion plan. Classroom and signals training space was planned for an annex to the Southside barracks complex, while elaborate simulator trainers were put in hand on an adjacent site. These included an anti-aircraft dome teacher and a tactical anti-submarine attack teacher which permitted integrated exercise of the command, gunnery, ASDIC, radar, R/T and depth-charge systems of the escort

98 Report on Repair Facilities, 19 April 1943; Seal to Admiralty, 7 April 1943.

99 Seal to Admiralty, 7 April 1943.

100 See MacKenzie, "Economic and Financial Review", p. 88.

fleet.¹⁰¹ The following year, this basic facility was developed into a comprehensive Tactical Training Centre, in which several days' intensive training could be given escort crews during lay-overs in port.¹⁰² Nor was the merchant marine neglected. Plans were included for a DEMS (Defensively-Equipped Merchant Ship) training range on the cliffs at Cape Spear. This range was completed in 1944 and mounted both anti-aircraft and larger calibre practice ordnance.

As befitted a major naval base and defended port, St. John's had been provided with first-line harbour defences in 1941. That year, conventional anti-torpedo parallel "baffles" were laid by the RCN across the Narrows and a regular examination service began. This last measure was a standard naval procedure of the time, consisting of a small patrol boat which stopped and boarded all ships making for port outside the harbour, inspecting them for concealed ordnance, munitions or other assault capability. This investigation was carried out under the heavy guns of a specially sited "examination battery" tasked to destroy any ships which began hostile action at the harbour entrance. Heavy coastal artillery defences were also provided by the Allies: in addition to a Canadian Army 4.7" examination battery at the outer end of the Narrows, large-calibre counter-bombardment batteries were emplaced at Cape Spear (Canadian 10") and Signal Hill/Redcliff (U.S. 8").

The RCN upgraded the harbour defences in 1942 with the addition of an anti-torpedo submersible gate and a controlled minefield in the Narrows. The 1943 expansion plans provided for enlargement of this mined defence and a new backup/emergency power system for it. However, the priority in harbour defence to be addressed by the expansion scheme was not St. John's harbour, but the hitherto undefended Conception Bay-Bell Island anchorage, where serious threat had appeared in the fall of 1942. Four ore carriers were sunk in two separate attacks in September and November that year and, most worrying for FONF, in neither case was the attacking U-boat located, still less engaged, by defending coastal artillery or naval patrols. FONF immediately ordered materials for a double continuous anti-torpedo baffle system, complete with entry and exit net gates, sufficient to cover the entire frontage of the Bell Island piers with a 600-foot wide protected anchorage.¹⁰³ In light of these events and related concerns for the security of St. John's and Bay Bulls, a new construction, fully-equipped boom defence depot was included in the 1943 expansion scheme, to be located at the easternmost end of the Admiralty's Southside wharfage.

Total costs of the expansion programme were estimated at around \$7 million which, with \$3 million committed but as yet unspent on the original development, brought a grand total of \$16 million. The Canadian cabinet approved disbursement of the new funds without delay, giving the go-ahead on 16 April 1943.¹⁰⁴ The cost of "Newfyjohn", however, remained a relatively minor element in U.K.-Canada

101 Seal to Admiralty, 7 April 1943, and to Deputy Minister, Naval Service, Ottawa, 27 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

102 Tucker, *Naval Service*, II, pp. 266-7.

103 FONF to Secretary, Naval Board, Ottawa, 12 November 1942, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 645.

104 Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 16 April 1943, in Bridle, *Documents*, pp. 616-7.

wartime indebtedness: by mid-1943, the U.K.'s Canadian dollar debt had already reached \$750 million.¹⁰⁵ The 1943 expansion scheme was a massive capital injection designed to transform provisional facilities into permanent and standard ones and to provide proper services and infrastructure that had been either absent or makeshift in the past. The clear intent was to replace makeshift facilities and to develop a more systematically manned and equipped first-line operational naval base. This included wholly new facilities such as the training establishments and boom defence depot. Expansion of existing premises included new items such as the small craft repair shop on the Southside and the new church, garage and canteen for HMCS Avalon. Utilities had, perhaps understandably, been particularly neglected at the improvised early stage and this was now a matter that could no longer be deferred. New heating plant and power services were to be provided the Avalon barracks and all of the Southside shops and buildings: sprinkler, fire alarm, ventilation and reserve lighting and power systems were planned for the RCN Dockyard, administration, hospital, magazine and controlled mine station buildings. Thirty thousand dollars was allocated for improvement of local roads alone.¹⁰⁶

The legal title position of the base remained *ad hoc* and non-systematic. The only consistent line of approach remained the preference, based in Newfoundland political calculations, for title and leases to be held by the British Admiralty rather than the Canadian government. Further transfers of leases, originally taken out by NSHQ, were made to the Admiralty, notably the shore site of the submarine gate winch house and the large property to be fully developed as the boom defence depot (this last was one of the more expensive items, agreed at \$2,400 per annum). In this second cycle of property acquisition, it was decided that no Canadian real estate intermediaries (who had not proved welcome or useful in 1941) would be involved. Seal's Admiralty professional staff were charged with arranging the details through Newfoundland's Public Utilities Commissioner after general terms had been agreed by all parties concerned.¹⁰⁷ As previously, the arrangements made were a mixture of outright purchase, mutually agreed rental charges, "peppercorn" rentals for use and improvement of property, and notional charges for Crown land. In cases involving large commercial operations, there was also provision for sale, with guaranteed options for repurchase after the war, conditional upon assessment of improvements made by the RCN. This latter type of lease was applied to the new machine shop site acquired from the Great Eastern Oil Company on the Southside.¹⁰⁸ The second hospital site was released by the Newfoundland

105 Canadian High Commissioner (Newfoundland) to Secretary of State (External Affairs), Ottawa, 9 June 1943, in Bridle, *Documents*, pp. 618-9.

106 Seal to Deputy Minister, Naval Service, Ottawa, 27 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

107 Seal to Deputy Minister Naval Service, Ottawa, 27 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist; Commissioner for Public Utilities (Newfoundland) to FONF, 29 April 1943, in Bridle, *Documents*, p. 617-8.

108 D. Org., "Title to Various Naval Properties, St. John's", submitted to Deputy Minister, Naval Service, Ottawa, 7 June 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

government (services included) for the duration of hostilities, on condition the facility reverted to them at the end of the war.¹⁰⁹

Although new construction began on some of the sites in the summer of 1943, and plans called for most of the new facilities to be operational by the winter of 1943-44, the RCN again encountered scheduling and completion difficulties. By May 1944, the best estimate for final completion of all project work was given as December.¹¹⁰ With priorities then narrowly focused on the European theatre, NSHQ decided to proceed with feasible projects in train and cancel problematic work altogether.¹¹¹ Cut from the programme at this time were the major improvements proposed for the congested RCN Dockyard.

Nevertheless, the base had by this time become self-sustaining, even if the full potential desired appeared unattainable. The Greenwich, the last symbol of base incapacity, had finally departed in July 1943. For the remainder of the war, an average of around 70 escort vessels were based at St. John's. In number no larger a force than the original NEF,¹¹² these vessels comprised more maintenance-demanding destroyers, together with new-design anti-submarine frigates and enlarged, longer-endurance corvette types. Moreover, they were all — some few visitors excepted — RCN vessels. In the period 1943-45, this better-equipped, trained and organized RCN escort fleet assumed virtual total responsibility for North Atlantic convoy work. In the new "Newfyjohn" this fleet benefited from a better organized and relatively well-provided maintenance, training and support base. The days had passed when St. John's seemed in Lamb's words, "all improvisation and make-do; more a state of mind than actual substance".¹¹³

At war's end both the St. John's base facilities and the repair depot at Bay Bulls were dismantled and the maintenance plant disposed of as surplus assets. Newfoundland interests did not wish wartime assets to become peacetime commercial rivals to local business and there was no serious wish (nor urgent strategic need) for such a large continued RCN anti-submarine presence.

Canada's military and command policies, from the outset of the Second World War, were intended as an autonomous contribution to the Commonwealth and Allied war effort and, as such, to assert the Dominion's status as a sovereign power.¹¹⁴ The RCN's "Newfyjohn" base and its strategic escort mission were the instruments of a naval policy with the same political end. No less than the independent standing of the Canadian Army Corps overseas, the RCN fleet and base command in Newfoundland expressed an autonomous strategic role for the Dominion's navy. FONF's command was also the largest single factor by far in the King government's strategic project to secure Newfoundland within the

109 Seal to Admiralty, 7 April 1943, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

110 Director (Plans) to ACNS, Ottawa, 10 May 1944, 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), DHist.

111 See Tucker, *Naval Service*, II, p. 201.

112 See Tucker, *Naval Service*, II, p. 203.

113 Lamb, *Corvette Navy*, p. 58.

114 See Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, *passim*.

“Canadian orbit”, an avowedly geo-political ambition which has been seen as typical of a traditional “defensive expansionism” in Canadian history.¹¹⁵

And yet as instruments of naval policy and political ambition, the RCN escort fleet and its Newfoundland base shared serious flaws. Equipment and training problems in the fleet led to tactical failures at sea and, ultimately, to a suspension of operational autonomy early in 1943. Similar equipment and manning deficiencies at “Newfyjohn” were the cause of logistical failures which necessitated massive corrective investment and reorganization. Fleet and base problems shared root causes: overly ambitious expansion programmes which far outran the available levels of institutional and industrial support. Mobilization of the Canadian economy for the demands of modern war produced a contracted-out, instant “turn-key” navy which lacked real capacity for the post-delivery maintenance, refitting, repair and modification essential for operational effectiveness.

Newfoundland experienced economic revival and real improvements in infrastructure and services during the period of hostilities. Yet the very non-representative “corporatist” character of its prewar government, so effective for wartime regulation and for accommodative liaison with the occupying Canadian and U.S. garrisons, was as obsolescent at war’s end as the defeated corporatist powers of the Axis. Politically and economically, Newfoundland’s options by the late 1940s were a function of its recent history. The history of the war itself had created a more diversified local economy and had changed relationships between the partners in the Atlantic triangle. As the empire turned its back on Atlantic possessions, Canada’s claims to “vital interest” and “special consideration” — first raised in connection with its underwriting of the development costs for “Newfyjohn” in 1941 — became the political determinants of the territory’s future. *Faute de mieux*, within a few short years Newfoundland became a prize for annexation by its tenant defenders.

115 See Neary, *Newfoundland and the North Atlantic World*, p. 356.

APPENDIX

Statement of Expenditures on Construction and Development,
St. John's Escort Base, to 31 October 1944

	(\$)	<i>Commitment</i>	<i>Expenditure</i>
<i>St. John's Base</i>			
Repairs, Alterations PWSS, Signal Hill		1,565.07	1,565.07
Repairs, McLaughlin's Wharf		9,149.77	9,149.77
Light & Power lines to Wireless stn. Harbour Grace		4,256.15	4,256.15
Power lines, Harbour Grace		4,238.13	4,238.13
Alterations, Angel Bldg.		3,613.46	3,613.46
Surveys, test pits		8,640.32	8,640.32
Surveys, test pits		10,000.00	—
		41,462.90	31,462.90
<i>Dockyard</i>			
Repairs and alterations		3,610.00	—
<i>Bay Bulls</i>			
Buildings, service roads, haulouts		2,128,600.00	2,090,144.10
<i>St. John's - British Admiralty Delegation</i>			
Purchase oil tank (Imperial Oil)		41,239.62	41,239.62
Install Oil tank (Botwood)		44,000.00	35,427.39
Surveys for base		4,308.44	4,308.44
Gen. Construction, Works & Bldgs.	15,873,640.00		14,111,356.01
Dredging	215,000.00		184,126.31
Erect 59,000 bbl tank	24,650.00		21,735.42
Purchase of pipe line	1,950.00		1,807.28
Erect 5 oil tanks	150,000.00 \		
Purchase 90,000 lbs steel plate	16,500.00 /		152,592.78
Engineering Services for fuel oil installations	45,849.02		45,849.02
Fuel pipes & fittings	50,000.00		31,698.61
War Watching Stn. N.W.River (Labrador)	15,000.00		—
Calibration, fuel storage tanks	797.28		797.28
Damage claim, Marshall Motors	25,000.00		22,667.78
Inspect steel for marine shop	544.12		544.12
Damage claim, St. John's Gas & Light	21,256.27		21,256.27
Surveys, Admiralty property	8,000.00		5,309.08
Dismantling 10,000 bbl tank	15,250.00		—
		16,552,994.75	14,680,715.41
TOTAL		18,726,667.65	16,802,322.41

Source: 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1), History Directorate, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa.