

# **“Too Wet, Too Steep, and Covered with Shifting, Unstable Sand”: Sable Island and Anti-submarine Warfare During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

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*Sable Island is best known for its shipwrecks and ponies. Additionally, it has an unexplored place in the history of Canadian anti-submarine warfare in the Atlantic. This paper examines how the Royal Canadian Air Force and Royal Canadian Navy used and sought to use Sable Island in their anti-submarine warfare operations throughout the Second World War (1939–45) and the early Cold War (1947–68). It argues that while Sable Island’s location made it an ideal base for submarine hunting aircraft, the harsh environment and challenges of building on a sandbar in the Atlantic Ocean limited its utility for Canada’s air force and navy.*

*L’Île-de-Sable est surtout reconnue pour ses épaves et ses chevaux sauvages. Pourtant, elle occupe une place méconnue dans l’histoire de la lutte anti-sous-marine canadienne dans l’Atlantique. Le présent article examine la façon dont l’Aviation royale canadienne et la Marine royale canadienne ont utilisé et cherché à utiliser l’Île-de-Sable dans leurs opérations de lutte anti-sous-marine durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale (1939–45) et au début de la Guerre froide (1947–68). Il fait valoir que si la situation géographique de l’Île-de-Sable en faisait une base idéale pour les avions de chasse de sous-marins, l’environnement hostile et les difficultés liées à la*

*construction sur un banc de sable dans l'océan Atlantique en ont limité l'utilité pour l'aviation et la marine canadiennes.*

In December 1960, a team of four officers from the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) took off from HMCS *Cape Scott* in a Sikorsky H04S helicopter for a flight over Sable Island. Their mission was to survey the 43-kilometre-long by 1.2-kilometre-wide crescent-shaped sandbar with the objective of constructing a permanent landing strip for C2SF Tracker anti-submarine aircraft. Upon flying over the island, Lieutenant-Commander Norman T. Long of the RCN observed that “the surface was completely unsuitable for use as an airfield being either too wet, too steep or covered with shifting, unstable sand.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite this initial assessment and opposition from the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), the naval aviation branch of the RCN, along with Commodore Kenneth Dyer, the Flag Officer Atlantic Coast, continued to push for the construction of a runway on Sable Island until directed over a year later by the chiefs of the Naval and Air Staff respectively to terminate the project. Even this directive did not mark the end of Canadian Forces interest in the island and by 1968 the newly unified Maritime Command, in concert with the Department of Transport (DOT), constructed a helicopter landing pad and refueling facility still in use to this day.

Sable Island, located 175 kilometres (km) off the coast of Nova Scotia, is best known in the popular imagination as the “Graveyard of the Atlantic.” With over 350 vessels estimated to have fallen prey to the island’s shifting sandbars, treacherous currents, and thick fog, this monicker is well earned. Another popular image that comes to mind when thinking of Sable Island is its ponies, a unique breed of small horses that have lived on the island since the 1700s and are the official horse of Nova Scotia. Submarines and airplanes, other than the small transport planes that bring people to and from the island, are rarely, if ever, associated with the place. Yet from 1940 to 1968 Sable Island had a little-known role in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) planning by the RCN, particularly its aviation branch. This paper will investigate how sections of the RCN used and planned to use Sable Island in fighting first German and then Soviet submarines patrolling the Atlantic Ocean.

The place of Sable Island in the Canadian military’s planning for ASW has been little studied. The official history of Canadian naval aviation produced by the Naval Historical Section in 1965 included only two brief mentions of

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<sup>1</sup> LCdr N.T. Long, “Provision of Satellite Air Strip for Sable Island,” 17 July 1961, 81/520/1440-128, Royal Canadian Navy Historical Section fonds, Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence, Ottawa (hereafter DHH).

Sable Island, first referencing a rescue flight to the island in 1956 and second a combined RCAF/RCN training operation, exercise Beaverdam III, which took place in proximity to Sable Island in March 1959.<sup>2</sup> The official histories of the RCAF and the RCN during the Second World War only briefly mention Sable Island. Volume two of the RCAF history discusses the use of the island as a refueling base for convoy protection aircraft in 1940 and 1942, while the RCN official history relates naval operations in the waters off Sable Island but does not cover the use of the land itself.<sup>3</sup>

The main discussion of Sable Island's place in military planning comes within the broader historiography of anti-submarine activities during the Cold War, particularly in relation to the construction of the Sound Surveillance Systems (SOSUS) by the United States Navy (USN). Both American and Canadian naval historians have referenced USN investigations of Sable Island as a potential site for the SOSUS station, which was ultimately built at Shelburne, Nova Scotia. However, given that sections of the Canadian record relating to surveying the island and the discussions between the US State Department, the USN, the RCN, and the Canadian Department of External Affairs have remained closed until released under *Access to Information and Privacy Act* provisions in 2024, the full extent of this chapter in Sable Island's history remains largely unexplored.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to flesh out this history by examining how Sable Island was used by the RCAF and RCN in ASW as well as examine the way that the

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<sup>2</sup> J.D.F. Kealy and E.C. Russell, *A History of Canadian Naval Aviation 1918–1962* (Naval Historical Section, Canadian Forces Headquarters, 1965), 58, 107. The Naval Historical Section was the RCN's historical section that merged with the army and air force historical sections in late 1965 to form the Directorate of History under the direction of C.P. Stacey.

<sup>3</sup> W.A.B. Douglas, *The Creation of a National Air Force*, vol. 2 of *Official History of the Royal Canadian Airforce*, ed. Norman Hillmer (University of Toronto Press, 1986), 521. For the RCN official history see W.A.B. Douglas et al., *No Higher Purpose*, vol. 2, pt. 1 of *Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939–1943* (Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2002) and W.A.B. Douglas et al., *A Blue Water Navy*, vol. 2, pt. 2 of *Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1943–1945* (Vanwell Publishing Limited, 2007). Sable Island is also mentioned in William Johnston et al., *The Seabound Coast*, vol. 1 of *Official History of the Royal Canadian Navy, 1867–1939* (Dundurn Press, 2010), 367, 394, 467, 705.

<sup>4</sup> See Gary Weir, "The American Sound Surveillance System: Using the Ocean to Hunt Soviet Submarines, 1950–1961," *International Journal of Naval History* 5, no. 2 (August 2006), [https://ijnh.seahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2012/01/article\\_weir\\_aug06.pdf](https://ijnh.seahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2012/01/article_weir_aug06.pdf) and Michael Whitby, "A 'New Look' at Cold War Maritime Defense: The Royal Canadian Navy's *Seaward Defence Report* and the Threat of the Missile-Firing Submarine, 1955," *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 4 (Autumn 2020): 8.



Map of Nova Scotia showing location of Sable Island, Halifax, Shelburne, and Cape Sable (Author's modifications from original on Wikimedia Commons created by Sémhur and GrandEscogriffe)

island has featured in the strategic planning of each organization, particularly the RCN during the 1950s and early 1960s. Doing so not only sheds light on a fascinating and little examined aspect of Canada's maritime and aviation history, but also helps to demonstrate the ways that Canada's military sought to respond to the evolving challenges of Cold War national and maritime defence and the advancements in submarine technology during the early Cold War.

### **Sable Island During the Second World War**

Prior to 1939, the only involvement of the Canadian military with Sable Island was the occasional resupply mission to the island's two light stations the former Department of Naval Service undertook in conjunction with the DOT. The outbreak of war with Germany in 1939 and the threat posed by German submarines to trans-Atlantic shipping caused the RCAF and RCN to take an interest in Sable Island. Its location made it well suited as a base for refueling flying boats engaged in convoy protection work. During the initial months of

the war the RCAF operated Supermarine Stranraers, biplane flying boats that could provide coverage for convoys for three days after leaving Halifax. If able to refuel at Sable Island, though, they could extend that coverage to four days.

Despite its positioning in the Atlantic Ocean, Sable Island was not a good choice for a refueling base. First, there were no landing or docking facilities for ships on the island. Resupply for the light stations was provided either by floating supplies in from ships moored a mile offshore or using shallow-draft surf boats. The second problem is that the only place on or near the island suitable for seaplane landing was a pond in the middle of the island known colloquially as Rice Lake. RCAF Flying Officer Leonard “Len” J. Birchall described it as “really just [water] between two sandbars. One side of the lake drops straight down and the other side sort of shelves off.”<sup>5</sup>

The combined result was that refueling any aircraft was challenging. To supply its planes the RCAF floated rafts of 45-gallon drums ashore from a transport ship a mile offshore then had lighthouse staff move them into Rice Lake where they were moored, awaiting a plane needing aviation fuel (AV gas). After landing on the lake and anchoring on the drop-off side with three anchors sunk into the sand on shore, Birchall described the refueling process which began when one of the air crew:

swam ashore and got one 45 gallon drum and rolled it down, got hold of it and drifted downwind with the drum. When he got to the aeroplane, we grabbed him. Then he righted the drum and held onto it with one arm, using the other to hold onto one of the walkways on the side of the aircraft. Then we knocked the bung out of the drum, put the pipe in her, got the pump going ... and started to pump the gas. The minute the drum floated high enough so that we could grab it we pulled the poor airman out.<sup>6</sup>

The process then had to be repeated multiple times to fill the two 250-gallon fuel tanks on the Stranraer. While Birchall and crew managed to refuel the plane and return to Dartmouth without any of them succumbing to hypothermia, the

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<sup>5</sup> L.J. Birchall, “Early RCAF/RCN Maritime Cooperation,” in *Salty Dips Vol. 2: ... and All Our Joints Were Limber*, ed. Mach Lynch (Naval Officers’ Association of Canada, 1985), 44. Air Commodore Leonard Birchall is best known as the “Saviour of Ceylon” for his actions on 4 April 1942 when the then squadron leader spotted a large Japanese fleet heading towards Ceylon. His crew of the PBY Catalina managed to send a radio warning to the British Command before being shot down and taken prisoner by the Japanese force.

<sup>6</sup> Birchall, “Early RCAF/RCN Maritime Cooperation,” 45.



A Supermarine Walrus of the Royal Canadian Navy. (Library and Archives Canada, a135609-v8)

process was neither efficient nor effective and Sable Island was only used as an emergency landing location for anti-submarine patrols during 1940–41.

Despite the logistical difficulties, the island's location made it relevant for RCAF/RCN attempts to counter German U-boats. In 1942, amid a German submarine onslaught along the American Eastern Seaboard, the need for air cover for convoys was even more pressing and after multiple reported submarine sightings in the area, Eastern Air Command floated the idea of using Rice Lake as a landing base for air patrols. Therefore, in conjunction with the British Royal Navy (RN) shore establishment in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia known as HMS *Saker*, the RCAF planned for a detachment of the Fleet Air Arm to be stationed on the island with support from the RCN. A working party under RCAF Flying Officer D.S. Johnson was sent from Station Dartmouth on the corvette HMCS *Oakville* along with RCN auxiliary vessel H.C. 67 (formerly the *M.F. Therese*) to Sable Island to set up a camp. The ships lay off the island for a day before the advance party could land, and it was another day before the stores could be put ashore. The camp, near Rice Lake where the aircraft were to alight, was completed early in June and the working

party returned to Dartmouth.<sup>7</sup>

The actual aircraft flown from the island were two RN Fleet Air Arm radar-equipped Supermarine Walrus. Affectionately known as “shagbats” by their crews, these amphibious flying boats could take off and land on water, land, or an aircraft carrier. Yet with no suitable ground for their wheels and limited take-off space on Rice Lake, the crews removed the under-carriages to save weight. Regardless of their weight, the two planes did very little flying during the first two weeks they were stationed on the island, limited by weather, particularly severe fog, to under seven hours of flight time. Furthermore, it was not possible to control operations from Dartmouth as the only radios were unencoded wireless transmissions from one of the DOT light stations on Sable Island. Hence the aircraft were left to operate on their own initiative.

The experiment ultimately ended when on 20 August 1942 one of the Walrus aircraft made an emergency landing into the Atlantic Ocean and spent three days floating before the crew was rescued by ships from convoy HX 204. The aircraft subsequently sank while under tow from HMCS *Napanee*. Although usefully situated, these challenges caused the RCAF and RCN to abandon Sable Island as a base for maritime aviation. The meteorological and geographic obstacles simply proved too costly to surmount. Most tellingly, in their entire time operating from the island, the two Walrus aircraft did not spot a single German U-boat.<sup>8</sup>

### United States Navy Interest in Sable Island

The end of the Second World War did not change the fact that submarines remained a major threat for both Commonwealth and American navies. At the end of the Second World War the Soviet Union had acquired German U-boat technology, most notably the technological advances the German navy had made with regards to snorkeling, battery life, and hydrodynamic hull shape. The Type XXI U-boat was the culmination of these advances and combined they allowed a submarine to move underwater faster and only stick the snorkel above the surface when running diesel engines to recharge batteries that now lasted longer. As the German Type XXI U-boats had demonstrated at the very end of the war, submerged patrols as long as eight weeks were possible. Thus, the submarine technology available to the Soviet navy allowed them to deploy substantially more capable submarines than those that had threatened Allied shipping from 1940 to 1943.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> W.A.B. Douglas, “Sable Island,” n.d., 81/520/1440-128, DHH.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas, *Creation of a National Air Force*, 521.

<sup>9</sup> For details of the German technology acquired by the Soviets see Owen R. Cote Jr., *The*

The challenge of meeting this new submarine threat resulted in what Owen R. Cote Jr. has termed the “Third Battle of the Atlantic.” In this battle the USN realized that a sustained anti-submarine effort bolstered by new technology would be required to maintain control of the sea.<sup>10</sup> As part of addressing the ongoing submarine threat, in 1946 the US National Research Council (now the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine) empaneled the Committee on Undersea Warfare, an academic advisory group. In 1950 the committee proposed a long-range ASW study, resulting in Project Hartwell, a collaborative initiative between scientists and naval officers examining ways to detect hostile submarines.<sup>11</sup>

The most important result of Project Hartwell was the realization that submarines could be detected at very long range (hundreds and possibly thousands of nautical miles away) using passive underwater surveillance. This form of surveillance relied on deep sound (SOFAR) channels in the ocean, locations where low frequency sounds would travel great distances underwater with little attenuation. Hydrophones could then detect these signals for analysis. While the existence of these sound channels was first discovered in 1937 and confirmed during the Second World War, it was only in 1950 that the idea of using them to detect the unique low-frequency vibrations produced by submarines was floated. Two projects – Jezebel, conducted by Bell Telephone laboratories, and Michael, conducted at Hudson Laboratory at Columbia University – worked on creating an effective surveillance system and the tools for analyzing the captured sounds for unique submarine signatures. When the findings of the two projects were combined, the result was SOSUS, given the unclassified designation Project Caesar.<sup>12</sup>

In January 1952, a prototype SOSUS installation was built off Eleuthere, Bahamas. This installation consisted of a 305-metre-long cable array with 40 hydrophones at a depth of 439 metres. Data from the arrays was then sent along the cables to Naval Shore Facilities (NavFacs) where the signals were processed to detect the unique underwater sound transmissions produced

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*Third Battle: Innovation in the US Navy's Silent Cold War Struggle with Soviet Submarines* (Naval War College, 2003), 12–15. For a discussion from a Canadian perspective of how German U-boat technology impacted ASW operations see Doug McLean, “Muddling Through: Canadian Anti-Submarine Doctrine and Practice 1942–45,” in *A Nation's Navy: In Quest of Canadian Naval Identity*, eds. Michael Hadley, Ron Huebert, and Fred Crickard (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 73–89 and Roger Sarty, *The Maritime Defence of Canada* (Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996), 169–80.

<sup>10</sup> Cote Jr., “The Third Battle,” 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> Norman Friedman, *Cold War Anti-Submarine Warfare* (Naval Institute Press, 2025), 136.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Polmar and Edward Whitman, *Hunters and Killers*, vol. 2, *Anti-Submarine Warfare from 1943* (Naval Institute Press, 2016), 122–23.

by submarines. Potential submarine contacts could then be investigated and prosecuted if required. The trials were so successful that by mid-1952 the USN decided to build similar installations along the entire eastern coast of North America, including a potential site in Canada.<sup>13</sup>

As such, the USN subsequently undertook a massive effort to identify suitable sites for SOSUS arrays and NavFacs that could exploit these deep sound channels while limiting the length of cable required to connect the arrays to the shore. Sable Island was one of the locations identified by the USN. In November 1952, the USN approached the Canadian Department of External Affairs seeking permission to carry out hydrographic surveys in the vicinity of the island to explore its suitability. The Chiefs of Staff Committee (CSC) considered this proposal in January 1953 and voiced no military objections to the surveys which were planned for between April and June of 1953.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout March and April, the USN provided technical and strategic briefings to the Canada–United States Military Cooperation Committee (MCC) and the CSC, explaining both the concept of SOSUS and why Sable Island was of particular interest. As M.B. Gardner, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (US) explained to the MCC, the SOSUS station on Sable Island would serve as the northern end of a chain of stations covering the entire eastern seaboard of North America. This network of stations was intended to form a barrier, detecting any Soviet submarines operating off the eastern coast of North America. However, as Gardner stated, the extent and effectiveness of the technology to operate in different areas of the ocean was still unknown, as was whether or not a detection barrier system of defence for eastern North America would even be feasible. Consequently, the USN needed to assess possible locations and begin construction at suitable sites immediately.<sup>15</sup>

In the briefing provided to the CSC, the US officials outlined what would be required to construct a typical SOSUS station. There were two main components: the onshore installations and the underwater array. On land, the station was “a shore facility, housing various electrical and electronic components, communications, and other supporting components.”<sup>16</sup> The cable array was laid on the ocean floor no more than 241 km from shore and was

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<sup>13</sup> Polmar and Whitman, *Hunters and Killers*, 123.

<sup>14</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, 28 January 1953, 73/1223, box 61, file 1307-1, Robert Lewis Raymont fonds, DHH.

<sup>15</sup> M.B. Gardner, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations to MCC, “United States Military Operating Requirements in Canada (Sable Island),” 17 March 1953, RG25, volume 6030, file 50291, Department of External Affairs fonds, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC).

<sup>16</sup> Presentation on a Military Operating Requirement: Sable Island, NS, 2 April 1953, RG25, volume 6030, file 50291, LAC.

comprised of “a long cable and an integral array of hydrophones, leading from the shore facility to deep water.” With this set up, USN officials told the CSC that they should be able to detect submarines operating up to 400 nautical miles (741 km) away from the shore facility.

The USN also explained to the CSC why Sable Island would be a critical site as the northern anchor for the barrier system they were planning to construct. Rather than emphasize the threat of Soviet submarines to shipping between North America and Europe, the USN made two arguments. First, Sable Island was located close to the main sea approaches of northeastern North America that Soviet submarines were expected to follow for a potential attack on the US and Canada. Second, Sable Island was thought to be the most economic site as it “affords the shortest run of cable from dry land to deep water, of any of the land areas in that ocean region.”<sup>17</sup> Five acres would be required to construct this station, plus another 11 acres for the communications array and a possible additional 10 acres for water catchment facilities if a desalination plant proved too expensive. Overall, the USN anticipated needing to support and supply a staff of 62 officers and other ranks to maintain the station – a responsibility they explicitly stated they were happy to share with their Canadian naval counterparts.<sup>18</sup>

With the support of both the Department of External Affairs and the Chiefs of Staff, the Cabinet Defence Committee granted final approval on 15 May 1953 for hydrological surveys in the vicinity of Sable Island. However, they made sure to explicitly state that the surveys would be joint endeavours between the two countries’ navies. Additionally, they made sure to specify that all information obtained during the surveys would be shared equally between the two countries.<sup>19</sup>

Eleven days later the two organizations began their joint survey of Sable Island with the USN tasking its hydrographic survey ship, the USS *Maury*, with this work. They quickly discovered, much as the RCAF, RCN, and Fleet Air Arm had during the Second World War, that the island was not geographically suitable for any type of support facility. Launches from the ship were unable to land on the island due to “a series of sand bars located between 100 yards and half a mile from the shoreline and varying in number and location from day to day and even from hour to hour.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, an RCN helicopter

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<sup>17</sup> Presentation on a Military Operating Requirement: Sable Island, NS, 2 April 1953, RG25, volume 6030, file 50291, LAC.

<sup>18</sup> Extract from the Journal of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence, April 1953, item 13, RG25, volume 6030, file 50291, LAC.

<sup>19</sup> Cabinet Defence Committee, 94<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 15 May 1953, 73/1223, box 65, file 1327, DHH.

<sup>20</sup> Lt(N) N.T. Long to Vice-Chief of Naval Staff, 30 May 1953, RG25, volume 6030, file

from HMCS *Magnificent* was assigned to the USS *Maury* and was responsible for ferrying the survey team and equipment to land. Once ashore, the team concluded that Sable Island would be an impractical site for the SOSUS station. In addition to problems of resupply, they found that connecting the undersea cables linking the underwater array to the shore station would be impossible. Cable-laying ships could only approach safely within eight km of the island and the smaller boats that could get closer to the shore could not lay cables. Furthermore, the cost of maintaining shore facilities would be prohibitive. The combined action of sand and spray corroded most exposed metal in a matter of years and any exposed glass within months. These factors led the USN to conclude, as reported by the RCN's liaison officer Lieutenant (N) Norman T. Long to the Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff, that "the US Navy considered that it would be far more logical to locate ... the station on the mainland."<sup>21</sup>

The survey expedition marked the end of American interest in utilizing Sable Island as an anti-submarine site. After briefly exploring the possibility of locating a SOSUS station at Cape Sable, the southernmost point of the province of Nova Scotia, the USN decided on a location of Shelburne, Nova Scotia.<sup>22</sup> This choice was approved by the Chiefs of Staff Committee in October 1953.<sup>23</sup> This station, located on the mainland at Government Wharf in an old Second World War RCN facility, became operational in 1955 and remained so until its closure in 1994.

### Resupplying Sable Island

While the American and Canadian navies, as well as the RCAF, demonstrated sporadic interest in the location, the DOT had maintained a continued presence on Sable Island since 1872. The records for DOT's resupply efforts prior to 1951 have been destroyed but those from 1951 onwards demonstrate the difficulties of supplying and supporting human habitation on a sandbar 175 km out to sea.

Two of the basic challenges were providing food for the island residents and diesel fuel for the generators. As J.A. Lenaham, the Nova Scotia regional director for the DOT explained, Sable Island could only be resupplied in summer and fall due to adverse weather conditions at other times of the year. Until it was decommissioned in 1959, the DOT ship *Lady Laurier* was tasked

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50291, LAC.

<sup>21</sup> Long to Vice-Chief of Naval Staff, 30 May 1953, RG25, volume 6030, file 50291, LAC.

<sup>22</sup> The USN would also construct a NAVFAC at Argentia, Newfoundland in 1959.

<sup>23</sup> 546th meeting Chiefs of Staff Committee, 7 October 1953, 73/1223, box 61, file 1307-1, DHH.

with providing supplies to the East and West Point light stations on the island. Much like the fuel supply ships during the Second World War, *Lady Laurier* was forced to anchor 1.6 km from shore and then lighter supplies using surf boats.<sup>24</sup> Once the boats had landed at the beach closest to the western light



Department of Transport workers unload provisions at Meteo Beach, 1959.  
(Library and Archives Canada, e011177176-v8)

station and associated meteorological station – hence known as Meteo Beach – the supplies needed to be transported to the storage warehouse, a distance of about 274 metres over soft sand.<sup>25</sup> Over the years a variety of methods for transporting supplies across the beach were tried, including pony carts and

<sup>24</sup> J.A. Lenahan, Regional Director, Air Services to Director of Air Services, 11 December 1959, RG12, volume 1638, file 6801-349, part 3, Department of Transport fonds, LAC.

<sup>25</sup> F.G. Nixon, Director, Telecommunications Branch to Director, Construction Branch, 20 May 1958, RG12, volume 1638, file 6801-349, part 3, LAC.

surplus Second World War Bren carriers.

As such, even something as basic as providing fresh food for the inhabitants of the island was incredibly difficult. Prior to 1957 there was only a kerosene-operated refrigerator which was not sufficient to keep food supplies fresh between supply ship visits, especially in winter. Consequently, in 1956 the DOT agreed to procure and install a chest deep-freeze unit for the island which could keep upwards of 227 kilograms of meat frozen for the full year. While there was sufficient generating capacity on the island to power the unit, these generators needed diesel fuel to provide electricity.<sup>26</sup>

As detailed above, even as late as 1959 the plan for providing fuel to the island's generating station remained identical to that from 1940. Eight to 12 45-gallon drums were loaded into surf boats and then towed by motor launch to the beach. The craft were beached and each drum was rolled up to above normal wave height at high tide where a pumping station was set up. The drums were emptied using hand pumps and then taken inland for "storage" or returned to the ship.<sup>27</sup> The problem with this arrangement was the sheer amount of time it took to unload the drums in direct comparison with the amount of diesel required to fuel the generators. Over 450 drums were required for the year, necessitating between 37 and 55 trips. Even in good weather, which was a dubious proposition, the supply vessels needed to be moored off the island for at least a week straight, quickly driving up costs. Given that there were already only a few months of the year when Sable Island could be resupplied and only two DOT supply ships on the Atlantic Coast, the time it took to unload fuel supplies was a major resource commitment for the department.

Fuel and food were not the only supplies required. Unlike other government detachments, the department needed to provide all household supplies to the people stationed on the island. Not only did that include basics such as food and fuel, but also amenities like "china, cooking utensils and silverwear."<sup>28</sup> By the 1950s the DOT was moving away from providing these physical items to government dwellings and instead providing cash, allowing the inhabitants to make their own purchases. That said, a memo to the Moncton district controller from February 1955 clearly states that Sable Island was the one exception to this policy. After all, where could the residents go to buy their kitchen supplies? Presumably the ponies and seabirds did not offer these items for sale.

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<sup>26</sup> H.H. McLean to Defence Research Analysis Establishment, 30 October 1956, RG12, volume 1638, file 6801-349, part 3, LAC.

<sup>27</sup> Lenahan to Director of Air Services, 18 February 1959, RG12, volume 1638, file 6801-349, part 3, LAC.

<sup>28</sup> R.W. Goodwin to Director of Air Services, 28 February 1955, RG12, volume 1638, file 6801-349, part 3, LAC.



RCN C2SF-2 Tracker aircraft in flight. (Library and Archives Canada, e010777387-v8)

The difficulties in supplying their employees on the island and the absolute imperative to do so led the DOT to investigate options for air resupply, at least for lighter and less fragile provisions such as food. As a 1958 memo outlined, the Air Services Branch of the DOT had some moderate success landing small aircraft on Sable Island during clear weather windows. These attempts culminated with the successful landing of a DC-3 with rubber tires on Meteo Beach at low tide.<sup>29</sup> However, much as with fixed-wing aircraft landing today, the ability to land on the beach is dependent on the firmness of the sand when the tide goes out, as well as the tide schedule itself. These factors served to limit the beach's potential for use as a consistently available landing strip, but nonetheless the DOT continued to investigate the possibility of building a permanent airstrip in the vicinity of Meteo Beach throughout the late 1950s.<sup>30</sup>

### **Royal Canadian Naval Air Interest in Sable Island**

The RCN maintained an active interest in DOT activities on Sable Island after the 1953 survey and while it proved impractical for hosting a SOSUS facility, the 1953 surveys demonstrated to some members of the RCN's

<sup>29</sup> F.G. Nixon to Director, Construction Branch, 20 May 1958, RG12, volume 1638, file 6801-349, part 3, LAC.

<sup>30</sup> Long, "Provision of Satellite Air Strip."

senior leadership the role the island could play in anti-submarine warfare. Specifically, RCN naval aviation branch personnel identified it as a potential operational base for the C2SF-2 Tracker ASW aircraft. These aircraft, newly acquired in 1956 by the navy, were their main ASW aircraft and operated from Naval Air Station Shearwater in Nova Scotia and off the newly commissioned aircraft carrier HMCS *Bonaventure*. However, with a range of only 2,150 km compared to the 9,000-km range of the RCAF's CP-107 Argus, the navy was reliant on their only aircraft carrier to extend the range of their ASW aircraft in the western Atlantic. A Sable Island landing strip could serve as a backup for *Bonaventure* and provide an added measure of flight safety for Tracker operations.

Expanding the range of the Tracker aircraft was a key priority of certain sections of the RCN's senior leadership throughout the late 1950s. This focus coincided with a broader strategic shift in the navy's thinking regarding its role in ASW. In the aftermath of the Second World War the main concern regarding Soviet submarines was that they would, much as Germany's U-boats had, threaten trans-Atlantic shipping. However, as early as 1948 some members of the RCN warned of another potential danger, that of missiles launched against North American targets from Soviet submarines.<sup>31</sup> By 1955 the RCAF and RCN were concerned about the potential of Soviet submarines to launch missiles. An assumed range of 200 nautical miles (370.4 km) for submarine launched missiles meant that two-thirds of all American Strategic Air Command (SAC) bases were within range of Soviet attack. A surprise attack by the Soviets could destroy much of the US's nuclear strike capability and pose a serious threat to NATO's strategy of nuclear deterrence.<sup>32</sup>

Due to the changing strategic environment, particularly in relation to ASW, in 1956 the RCN's Naval Warfare Study Group took up the question of how Canada's ASW forces should be employed. They argued in their report that the navy should move away from deploying Canada's aircraft carrier to the Eastern Atlantic Area in the event of hostilities with the Soviet Union and rather plan to station it in the Western Atlantic to hunt for missile-launching Soviet submarines. The group also recommended that Canada retain its

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<sup>31</sup> Isabel Campbell, "A Transformation in Thinking: The RCN's Naval Warfare Study Group of 1956," in *People, Policy and Programmes: Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Maritime Command (MARCOM) Historical Conference (2005)*, eds. Richard H. Gimblett and Richard O. Mayne (Canadian Naval Heritage Press, 2008), 165–67.

<sup>32</sup> John Orr, "Some Policy Aspects of Canadian Involvement in Strategic ASW, 1945–1968," in *People, Policy and Programmes*, 183–203. For a detailed discussion of the various classes of Soviet missile-launching submarines, see Peter Haydon, *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1993), 78–81.

aircraft carrier HMCS *Magnificent* despite the acquisition of the new HMCS *Bonaventure*. When this proposal was rejected, the RCN's Ad-Hoc Committee on Naval Aviation recommended that they acquire a second, larger aircraft carrier of the *Essex* class tentatively named HMCS *Vancouver*. Under this proposal, HMCS *Bonaventure* would be used as a shuttle carrier to fulfill Tracker aircraft requirements for refueling and rearming only. The idea behind these proposals was to achieve area saturation for probable missile launch zones off the east coast of North America in cooperation with the RCAF's maritime patrol aircraft.<sup>33</sup>

The imperative to expand the range of the Tracker was reinforced by the experience of the RCN during exercise Beaverdam III, which took place in the Eastern Atlantic around Sable Island from 11 to 16 March 1959. The goal of the exercise was to test plans and tactics for defending Canada from missiles launched by Soviet submarines off the Canadian Atlantic Seaboard. Maritime Commander Atlantic Rear-Admiral H.F. Pullen described the *raison d'être* of the exercise:

The basic premise is that the enemy will use air-breather, cruise-type missiles which can only be launched from a fully-surfaced trim, following a ten-minute preparation period. Surfacing within the probable launching areas constitutes a hostile act, discovery of which cancels all attack restrictions throughout the CANLANT [Canadian Atlantic] Area. Unless the submarines are detected and destroyed within the ten minute exposure periods, their launches will be successful.<sup>34</sup>

In order to respond to this threat, the joint RCN–RCAF Maritime Command developed the beartrap tactic.<sup>35</sup> Pullen explained the concept as embodying “the concentration of surface and air forces within what are deemed probable

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<sup>33</sup> For information on the 1956 study group see Campbell, “A Transformation in Thinking,” 165–81. For discussion about the RCN's quest to acquire an additional aircraft carrier see Michael Whitby, “Fouled Deck: The Pursuit of an Augmented Aircraft Carrier Capability for the Royal Canadian Navy, Part 2, 1956–64,” *Canadian Air Force Journal* 3, no.4 (2010): 12.

<sup>34</sup> Office of Maritime Commander Atlantic, “Beaverdam III Exercise Analysis,” 24 February 1959, 73/561, DHH.

<sup>35</sup> As opposed to the beartrap mechanism used to facilitate landing helicopters on RCN frigates and destroyers which was developed at the same time. For more information on the helicopter beartrap technology, see Sean Cafferky, *Uncharted Waters: A History of the Canadian Helicopter-carrying Destroyer* (Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2005) and Aaron Plamondon, *The Politics of Procurement: Military Acquisition in Canada and the Sea King Helicopter* (UBC Press, 2010).

missile launching areas, in such density as to ensure that a submarine can be observed and attacked within ten minutes of surfacing.”<sup>36</sup> The key to the beartrap tactic was not only to rapidly detect hostile submarines but to then have proximate assets prosecute any contacts within the very short timeframe before launch. Given their speed and range compared with surface ships, the RCAF’s CP-107 Argus maritime patrol aircraft and the RCN’s CS2F-2 Tracker aircraft were critical elements of the plan. Yet unlike the Argus, which was a shore-based air force asset, the Trackers were reliant on HMCS *Bonaventure*. As the exercise would demonstrate, this limitation seriously impacted the ability of the navy to prosecute probable submarine contacts.

For newly installed Maritime Commander Atlantic Rear-Admiral Kenneth Dyer, the lessons of Beaverdam III were clear: the Tracker aircraft needed an expanded operational range and more time patrolling their designated sector of the ocean. Without a second aircraft carrier, Sable Island seemed like a possible alternative, essentially a static aircraft carrier made of sand in the Western Atlantic. Despite not being an aviator himself, Dyer had extensive experience with naval aviation, serving on the British carrier HMS *Glory* and American carrier USS *Intrepid* during the Second World War before assuming command of the Canadian carrier HMCS *Magnificent* in 1951. In August 1960 Rear-Admiral Dyer first floated the idea of constructing an airstrip on the island to the Naval Secretary and to the Chief of the Air Staff Air Marshall Hugh Campbell. Dyer accurately stated that in the event of hostilities, RCN plans called for HMCS *Bonaventure* to be stationed in the vicinity of the island but that the sea and weather conditions of the North Atlantic often made carrier flying impossible. Having a land-based airstrip in the vicinity would allow greater flying time for the Trackers, provide an emergency backup landing strip, and allow a greater number of aircraft to operate concurrently. He further emphasized that if a squadron of Trackers could be operated from Sable Island then even during an early pre-conflict alert stage, the RCAF’s aircraft and the carrier-based Trackers could be deployed further out into the Atlantic extending the search area and providing more advanced warning of potential submarine attacks.<sup>37</sup> The nature of the submarine threat had changed from only protecting convoys during the Second World War to primarily stopping submarines from launching missiles at North America. The usefulness and importance of employing Sable Island as an ASW aircraft base increased while

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<sup>36</sup> Office of Maritime Commander Atlantic, “Beaverdam III Exercise Analysis,” 24 February 1959, 73/561, DHH.

<sup>37</sup> Maritime Commander Atlantic to Naval Secretary and Chief of Air Staff, 31 August 1960, 81/520/1440-128, DHH.

the challenges associated with its use remained the same.

Other members of the RCN's senior leadership were quick to support the Maritime Commander Atlantic's proposal for a Sable Island airstrip. Foremost among them was Commodore D.W. Piers, Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff (Plans). Piers had enlisted in the RCN during the 1930s and rose to command the destroyers HMCS *Restigouche* and later HMCS *Algonquin* during the Second World War. In the postwar years he held appointments including director of Naval Plans and Operations and served on the staff of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT). Piers was thus familiar with the threat of the Soviet Union's subsurface fleet and regarded an airstrip on Sable Island as a potential solution to the tactical problems facing the RCN.

In September 1960, Piers briefed the Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff on the Maritime Commander's proposal and threw his support behind the plan. Piers outlined the main reasons for constructing the airstrip, including greater training effectiveness, more operational time for Tracker aircraft, and the provision of a base of operations for naval aircraft outside of the Halifax area, which it was presumed would be targeted by the Soviet Union in the event of hostilities. In his memo, Piers also reflected the thinking of the RCN's Naval Warfare Study Group which emphasized the importance of cooperation between aircraft and submarines in ASW operations.<sup>38</sup> Overall, the logic behind Piers's memo was sound. A landing strip and ground facilities on Sable Island, even a small one that allowed emergency refueling and landing, would be useful for the RCN and make them a more effective and resilient ASW force.<sup>39</sup>

Due to its unique structure, Maritime Command was a joint RCN/RCAF operational command with a naval officer as its head and an air force officer serving as deputy. As such, the Sable Island proposal went to the heads of both the navy and air force. Unlike senior naval officials, Air Marshall Hugh Campbell, Chief of the Air Staff, opposed the proposal. His dissent was not founded on strategic or operational reasons, for in a memo to his naval counterpart written in October 1960, Campbell conceded the points that Piers made regarding range of Tracker aircraft, training benefits, and operational flying time. Campbell's objections were anchored in geography. In his response directed to the Chief of the Naval Staff, Campbell wrote that "RCAF use of Sable Island as an ASW base in WW2 was abandoned due to the magnitude of logistical problems involved ... The weather was also not suitable for

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<sup>38</sup> Naval Warfare Study Group Report, RG 24/R112, Accession 97-98/260, box 28, file 1279-155, volume 2, LAC.

<sup>39</sup> Piers to Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff, 19 September 1960, 81/520/1440-128, DHH.

flying operations.”<sup>40</sup> Interservice rivalry, always present in joint RCN/RCAF discussions, also motivated Campbell to demur. After explaining his practical objections, Campbell highlighted how the RCAF was responsible for shore-based aircraft while the RCN was tasked with operating ship-based aircraft. Although the Trackers were carrier-based aircraft, the navy was proposing to construct a shore-based facility which should theoretically fall under RCAF jurisdiction, and the air force had no desire to construct or operate an airstrip on Sable Island.<sup>41</sup>

The RCAF would consistently oppose the project throughout 1960–61 but that did not stop the RCN’s Naval Air Branch from proceeding with planning. In December 1960, they dispatched a party of four naval officers led by Lieutenant-Commander Norman T. Long, the same RCN officer who had been on the 1953 surveying mission with the USN, to investigate constructing an airstrip and shelter for 35 men on the island. Travelling on the recently refitted maintenance vessel HMCS *Cape Scott*, the party anchored off Sable Island on 9 December 1960, and the next morning took a helicopter to conduct a low-level visual survey of the area. They immediately discovered that “the majority of the surface was completely unsuitable for use as an airfield being either too wet, too steep or covered with shifting, unstable sand. One area only showed promise, and this was in the vicinity of the meteorological station.”<sup>42</sup> The helicopter and its crew then landed on the island in the vicinity of the West Lighthouse and met with Arthur Dooks, the lighthouse keeper. Dooks confirmed their initial observations regarding suitable locations for a full airstrip but also suggested that a smaller, emergency strip could be constructed in the vicinity of the lighthouse.

The team proceeded to survey the two locations with Dooks. The western lighthouse location was flat and dry but would only be suitable for an 823-metre-long runway. In the estimation of the survey team, the ground would also likely rut badly with regular take-offs and landings. Furthermore, limitations on length and width would make it unsuitable for Tracker aircraft to operate using such a runway. Thus, the only possible option was the location on Meteo Beach where the DOT had successfully landed a DC-3. Based on this success and the supply challenges for Sable Island, DOT Maritime Services based in Moncton, New Brunswick, investigated constructing a runway for light aircraft. However, the scale that the navy was envisioning was much larger than the existing DOT plans.

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<sup>40</sup> Campbell to Chief of the Naval Staff, 24 October 1960, 81/520/1440-128, DHH.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell to Chief of the Naval Staff, 24 October 1960, 81/520/1440-128, DHH.

<sup>42</sup> Long, “Provision of Satellite Air Strip.”

Further investigation of the Meteo Beach site confirmed that it would be suitable for landing aircraft. The land was already flat and required little grading and the area was suitably large to allow an airstrip of sufficient width (61 metres) and length (1,950.7 metres). Additionally, soil samples confirmed that the ground had a sufficient load-bearing capacity for the fully loaded Tracker aircraft which weighed 10,990 kilograms. The main issue was a complete lack of building materials other than sand. While the sand, if sufficiently compacted, would provide a suitable base for a landing strip, doing so would require heavy machinery and as discussed above, landing even fuel and food, much less construction equipment and supplies on the island, proved exceptionally difficult.

With regards to the construction of the airstrip, the survey team proposed building a main runway of 1,981 metres for Tracker landings and takeoffs, plus an emergency 1,372-metre backup landing strip that could also be used by DOT light aircraft. The runway itself would be built on top of compacted sand using a mix of asphalt or soil cement with a bituminous coating. To stabilize the shoulders and overshoot area of the strip, the team proposed using either native grasses or specifically bred rye grass acquired through the Dominion Experimental Farm. The team estimated the total cost of the runway to be \$1,750,000 (\$18.4 million in 2026 dollars) plus another \$250,000 (\$2.6 million in 2026 dollars) to provide fabricated metal buildings for housing personnel and machines which could “be landed and erected on a prepared site in a short period and at relatively low cost.”<sup>43</sup>

Given that the survey team visited Sable Island in December, winter weather conditions prevented any further action on the project until the summer of 1961. At this point, senior leadership in both the navy and the air force were opposed to the project. A memo from Lieutenant-Commander E.F. Brooman, head of aircraft facilities for naval aviation, to the Director of Naval Aviation outlined the objections of both the RCN and RCAF. While senior naval leadership agreed with the operational need for the airstrip, they viewed the cost as prohibitive. The RCAF was much more direct in their opposition, using the arguments of Air Marshall Campbell from the year before, citing logistical and meteorological challenges. Overall, Brooman stated, “all persons contacted considered the proposal impractical.”<sup>44</sup>

Despite continued opposition, members of the Naval Air Branch of the RCN continued to press forward with the project. Only weeks after he had detailed the opposition to the Sable Island initiative, Brooman prepared a detailed

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<sup>43</sup> Long, “Provision of Satellite Air Strip.”

<sup>44</sup> E.F. Brooman to DNAR, 27 June 1961, 81/520/1440-128, DHH.

briefing note on the island for his boss, Captain V.J. Wilgress, Director of Naval Aircraft Requirements. This package included an annotated bibliography prepared by the Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, a report on the island's physical features, and a geographic history of Sable Island. Brooman also noted that the RCAF had conducted photo reconnaissance of the area in 1959, and the photos were available on request. Finally, a magnetometer survey of the island was available,<sup>45</sup> along with relevant analysis by seismic and geological experts from the Department of Northern Affairs.

Wilgress also threw his support behind the project. In a memo dated 24 July 1961, he first acknowledged the RCAF and RCN opposition, stating, "Most authorities seem, like the RCAF, pessimistic about building a landing strip on the island." He was not convinced though, writing, "I believe if we could prove a need, modern engineering should be able to solve this problem ... It is suggested that an operational analysis is the first way to tackle this problem."<sup>46</sup> Wilgress, like many members of the RCN, recognized what a boon an airstrip on Sable Island would be for naval air operations. This point was almost universally accepted by everyone in the RCN and RCAF. But where the naval aviation officers differed from navy and air force headquarters was their belief in the ability of modern technology to overcome the immense problems posed by the unique environment of where they wished to build.

Ultimately, the decision of whether the drawbacks of building on Sable Island outweighed the operational benefits of doing so fell to the Chief of the Naval Staff. In December 1961, the senior leader of the RCN sunk the proposal for good. In a directive to Rear-Admiral Dyer, Maritime Commander Atlantic and the originator of the proposal, Captain Allan O. Solomon, Secretary of the Naval Board, stated that "the disadvantages of such an endeavour more than outweigh [*sic*] the advantages." Specifically, the Naval Board instructed Dyer to "no longer contemplate any further action in this respect. It is not approved, therefore, to include this project in the Atlantic Command base Development Plan."<sup>47</sup> This directive marked the end of serious interest from the RCN in using Sable Island as a base for naval air assets. While its placement in the Atlantic would always make it a tempting location for any organization tasked with keeping Canada safe from enemy submarines, the physical characteristics of the site presented too many challenges to overcome.

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<sup>45</sup> A magnetometer is an instrument that surveys fluctuations in the Earth's magnetic field and is used in oceanographic research to survey underwater geological structures and in conjunction with active side sonar, is used to locate ship and airplane wrecks. They are often towed arrays on a cable run off the stern of a research vessel.

<sup>46</sup> V.J. Wilgress, "Sable Island," 24 July 1961, 81/520/1440-128, DHH.

<sup>47</sup> Naval Secretary to Flag Officer Atlantic Coast, 1 December 1961, 81/520/1440-128, DHH.



Sea King helicopter landing on Sable Island. (Zoe Lucas, Sable Island Institute, <https://sableislandinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/1-helicopter-fuel-facility-photo-Zoe-Lucas.jpg>)

### **Constructing a Helipad on Sable Island**

Despite construction difficulties and costs associated with building any aviation facilities on Sable Island, its location in the Atlantic Ocean ensured continued military interest. Ultimately, by 1968 Maritime Command – functionally the Royal Canadian Navy after unification of the forces – approved, in cooperation with the DOT, construction of a helicopter landing pad on the island. This new facility would act as an emergency landing and refueling location for Sea King and Labrador helicopters.

The process for constructing the facilities began in May 1967 when Maritime Command approached the Marine Services Section of the DOT to share costs on building a helicopter landing pad on Sable Island. As discussed earlier in the paper, the DOT had a standing resupply obligation for their facilities on the island, and a helipad would help fulfill these duties. By November of 1967 the two organizations had agreed to share the cost of construction, with maintenance responsibilities of the landing pad falling to the DOT given their continual presence on the island.<sup>48</sup>

For Maritime Command the allure of Sable Island remained its ability to extend the operational range of air assets, but by 1967 the focus was largely on rotary wing search and rescue and ASW aircraft. The main concern of Maritime

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<sup>48</sup> H.A. Porter, Director General Maritime Forces to Commander, Maritime Command, 15 November 1967, RG24/R112, volume 29731, file 7635-S3, Department of National Defence fonds, LAC.

Command was to lengthen the distance out to sea the Labrador helicopters could operate. A secondary concern was providing an emergency landing and refueling station for Sea King helicopters. Due to the Sea King's ability to operate off some RCN ships this was less of a concern than as a stop for Labradors, which were shore-based only. As stated in the authorization order originally issued in April 1968, Sable Island was already being used as an emergency landing spot for both Sea Kings and Labradors but on "unprepared surfaces." These landings resulted in a massive amount of sand flying into the air resulting in "sand congestion hazards which could result in costly damage to helicopter engines. The provision of a pad would materially reduce the hazard."<sup>49</sup>

The construction of the helicopter pad was completed in late 1968 with an innovative design. A corrugated steel bin, 22 metres wide and 1.8 metres high, was filled with sand and then topped with wooden planks and aluminum sheets. Around the pad was a water pond almost 46 centimetres deep, designed to keep sand congestion to a minimum. A timber catwalk was then constructed to bridge the pond and allow foot access to the top of the pad. The total cost of the project was \$17,410 (\$153,000 in 2026 dollars).<sup>50</sup> It remained in use as the only landing pad on the island until the Canadian Coast Guard constructed a new primary landing location in 1984. The 1968 pad, however, is still in use as a secondary refueling point as of 2026.

## Conclusion

Forty-three years later, on 17 October 2011, the Government of Canada and the Government of Nova Scotia signed a memorandum of understanding committing to create Sable Island National Park Reserve. On 1 December 2013, Bill S-15 officially recognized the park under *Canada's National Parks Act*. Included in this legislation was a provision to ban both exploratory and extractive drilling for petroleum resources on the island itself and up to one nautical mile (1.85 km) out to sea.<sup>51</sup> Legislative protection for the island's unique environment and flora and fauna represents how the modern Canadian population see Sable Island as a natural and cultural resource to be protected from development and exploitation.

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<sup>49</sup> CFB Greenwood, Maritime Command #1 RCEO Serial number 884 (R1), 19 April 1968, RG24/R112, volume 29731, file 7635-S3, LAC.

<sup>50</sup> CFB Greenwood, Maritime Command #1 RCEO Serial number 884 (R1), 11 December 1968, RG24/R112, volume 29731, file 7635-S3, LAC.

<sup>51</sup> Parks Canada, "Park Establishment: Sable Island National Park Reserve," Government of Canada, accessed 6 June 2025, <https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ns/sable/culture/creation>.

However, during the Second World War and Cold War, Canada's military, particularly the RCN, viewed Sable Island as a possible location on which to base aircraft engaged in anti-submarine warfare, first against German and then Soviet submarines. From using it as a refueling base for flying boats engaged in convoy protection work in the North Atlantic during the Second World War, to serving as a location for shore facilities for a SOSUS station, through to constructing a runway from which the RCN's Tracker aircraft could operate, Sable Island featured in the RCN's ASW planning during the period from 1940 to 1968. Yet, despite the promise of its location 300 km offshore of Halifax on important Atlantic sea-lanes, the natural environment of Sable Island proved too hostile for any sustained military use.

The final decision by the military to construct a helicopter landing pad on the island in 1968 was the result of drastically reduced ambitions due to both natural and financial limits. Yet despite the plans for SOSUS stations or airfields not coming to fruition, the story of planning and ultimately cancelling these projects reveals much about the way the RCN conceived of the threat of Soviet submarines during the 1950s and 1960s and how the naval aviation branch of the force sought to assert continued relevance.

While the naval aviators' battle for relevance and eventual survival was a losing one, it was not for lack of ambition or imagination. Rather, much like the runway on Sable Island, practical and financial considerations were the ultimate determining factors. With the CP-107 Argus capable of sustained ASW operations over the North Atlantic from Nova Scotia's mainland and smaller naval vessels able to support helicopter operations taking over from the costly and aging carrier HMCS *Bonaventure*, there was no clear need for fixed-wing naval aviation. Without Tracker aircraft, the need for landing facilities on Sable Island no longer existed and so the island, beyond the helicopter pad for emergency use, was left to a limited number of civilians and ponies. With the recent legislative protections, it will remain that way for the foreseeable future.

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