

“First Line of Defence”: The Establishment and Development of St. John’s, Newfoundland as the Royal Canadian Navy’s Premier Escort Base in the Second World War

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La création de la Force d'Escorte Terre-neuvienne à Saint-Jean, Terre-Neuve en mai 1941 a soulevé d'importantes questions dans les relations entre le Canada et la dominion insulaire. La Grande-Bretagne, face à un assaut sur les transports alliés par les sous-marins allemands dans l'océan atlantique central et occidental, a fortement encouragé la création d'une nouvelle force d'escorte. Le gouvernement canadien était bien disposé, mais pour des raisons qui n'étaient pas purement militaires, y compris un accroissement de l'influence du Canada sur la Terre-Neuve. En revanche, la Commission gouvernementale de Terre-Neuve, embarrassée de l'affaire anglo-américaine qui a donné le contrôle aux USA d'importants sites terre-neuviens, et soupçonneux des intentions canadiennes, hésitait à permettre une "occupation" de son territoire par encore une puissance étrangère. Finalement, les gouvernements canadien et terre-neuvien sont parvenus à trouver une solution commune et HMCS Avalon, le nom des installations portuaires à Saint-Jean, s'est vu devenir une des bases d'escorte les plus importantes de l'Atlantique nord.

The Chiefs of Staff Committee is of the opinion that in the defence of the North American continent, Newfoundland... is in many ways our first line of defence.

*Canadian Secretary of State to the British Dominions Secretary
12 March 1941*

Although originally intended to be only a defended harbour and coastal escort base, St. John’s, Newfoundland became one of the most important Allied naval bases of the Second World War.¹ The most obvious reason for the change was that the port proved essential for end-to-end anti-submarine escort of the vital convoys between the New World and the Old against the transatlantic assault by the German U-boat fleet that began in 1941.

¹ On the original purpose of the base, see L.W. Murray (Commodore Commanding the Newfoundland Force [CCNF]) to Naval Service Headquarters, Ottawa (NSHQ), and Commander-in-Chief Western Approaches (CinCWA), 30 June 1941, Canada, Department of National Defence (DND), Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), Flag Officer Monthly Report (FOMR), NSS-1000-5-20, vol I.

From the Canadian standpoint, however, there was more at stake than Allied victory in the Atlantic. Naval Service Headquarters (NSHQ) in Ottawa was concerned about the need to promote Canada's distinct, national contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic and retain control of its naval forces in an ocean war dominated by the two major western powers. In addition, there was a more pressing political worry. The Americans were constructing naval, air and army bases across Newfoundland as a result of the "destroyers for bases" agreement reached with Britain in 1940.² If Canada did not increase its presence on the island, the country was faced with the possibility of an American protectorate on its front doorstep.³

Canada, seeking to avoid entanglement in military commitments during the rising international tensions during the Great Depression had considered Newfoundland nothing but a liability in 1933, but by 1941, in the face of actual, immediate threats on the Atlantic, viewed the island dominion as an "essential Canadian interest."⁴ The Canadian government recognized Newfoundland's importance not only due to its location athwart the major convoy routes but also as part of the "Canadian orbit."⁵ Newfoundland was now seen as the "key to the gulf of Canada"⁶ and "in many ways [its] first line of defence."⁷ As a result, when

² The agreement between the United States and Britain gave the former the right to construct bases on British territory in the Western Hemisphere in return for fifty surplus destroyers, six of which went to the Royal Canadian Navy. While not a condition of this agreement, bases were at the same time also offered to the United States in Bermuda and Newfoundland "freely and without consideration." The US received rights to specific base sites in detailed negotiations that resulted in an Anglo-American bases agreement that was signed on 27 March 1941. The US ultimately had forces stationed at St. John's, Torbay, Argentia, Gander, Stephenville and Goose Bay (Goose Bay was also not part of the deal; it was a Canadian facility, negotiated by the Canadian Government and Newfoundland Commission of Government but the Americans were invited to station forces there). By war's end, there were 100,000 American servicemen in Newfoundland and Labrador, and 750,000 military personnel and passengers had passed through the various facilities throughout the colony. See John N. Cardoulis, *A Friendly Invasion: The American Military in Newfoundland 1940-1990* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1990), 19. For further discussion on the American presence in Newfoundland, see also Peter Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World 1929-1949* (2nd ed, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 135; David MacKenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation, 1939-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 46-52; David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 121-132, 169-175; and Charlie Whitham, "On Dealing with Gangsters: The Limits of British 'Generosity' in the Leasing of Bases to the United States, 1940-41," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, VII:3 (November 1996), 589-630.

³ MacKenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle*, 49 and 65.

⁴ *The Mackenzie King Record. Vol. I, 1939-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 202; and Minutes of a Meeting of War Cabinet Committee, September 17, 1940, in Paul Bridle (ed), *Documents On Relations Between Canada and Newfoundland* (2 vols, Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1974-1984), 99.

⁵ Minutes of a Meeting of War Cabinet Committee, 10 June 1941, in *Documents on Relations*, 571.

⁶ High Commissioner in Newfoundland to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 3 December 1941, in *ibid*, 115.

⁷ Secretary of State for External Affairs to Dominions Secretary, 2 March 1941, in *Documents on Relations*, 103. For a further examination of Newfoundland's strategic importance, see A.R.M. Lower, "Transition to Atlantic Bastion," in R.A. MacKay (ed), *Newfoundland: Economic, Diplomatic, Strategic*

the over-stretched British asked the Royal Canadian Navy to take a leading role in the development of a major, transatlantic escort force and its proposed base at St. John’s, naval minister Angus MacDonald and the naval staff were enthusiastic.⁸ Prime Minister Mackenzie King, on the other hand, more coolly suggested that it was “in accordance with established principles of Empire defence,”⁹ a phrase that for his mouth reminded his colleagues that there were potential political difficulties as well as opportunities. Nevertheless, with the establishment of the Newfoundland Escort Force (NEF) in the spring of 1941 and the first efforts to develop large-scale base facilities at St. John’s, Canada was seeking a victory over more than just the U-boats in the Battle of the Atlantic.

Ottawa had made a commitment to Newfoundland’s defence even before Canada had entered the war against Germany.¹⁰ There was much to defend in Newfoundland at the time, including the airport at Gander, the trans-Atlantic seaplane base at Botwood, the iron ore mines on Bell Island, the numerous cable and wireless stations, and of course, the city of St. John’s, the economic and political centre of Newfoundland. With the war in Europe at a stalemate, the Canadian government did not act upon its commitment until 1940. The collapse of France and the Low Countries in June 1940 forced Ottawa to dispatch the first battalion of the Black Watch of Canada to Newfoundland and to station five Douglas Digby bombers from RCAF No10 Squadron at Gander. Coastal defence was also a concern in the summer of 1940. There was only one operational battery in Newfoundland at that time, the 1st Coast Defence Battery of the Newfoundland Militia consisting of two 4.7-inch guns and two searchlights protecting the ore-ship loading facilities at Wabana, Bell Island.¹¹ St. John’s was unprotected. To remedy this situation, the Canadian Army installed and garrisoned gun emplacements at Fort Amherst at the entrance to St. John’s Harbour.¹²

Studies (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1946), 484-508.

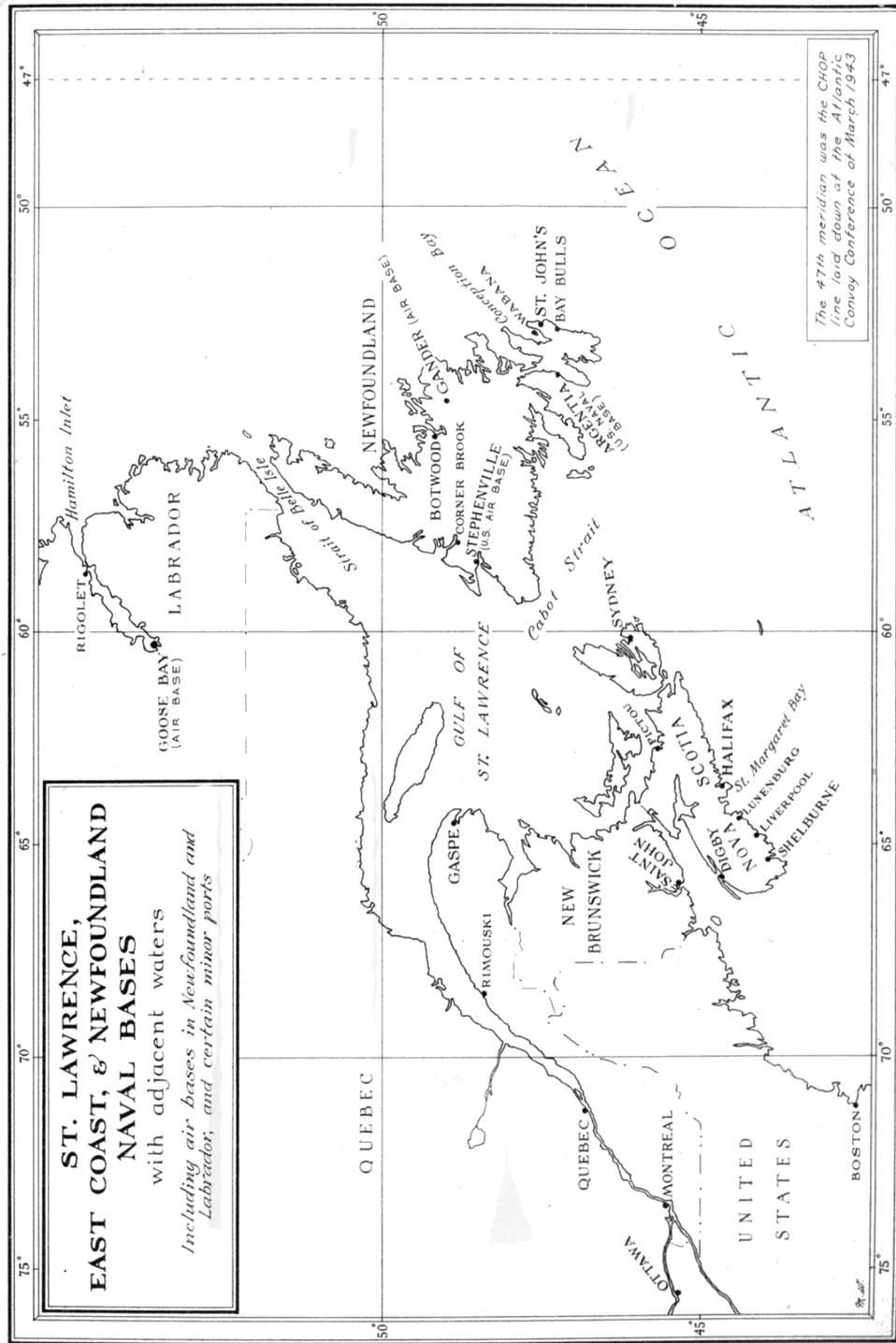
⁸ Submission to Council by Minister (Naval Service), 10 June 1941, DND, DHH 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1).

⁹ Minutes of a Meeting of Cabinet War Committee, 27 May 1941, in *Documents On Relations*, 564. The Prime Minister was not all that enthusiastic, mainly on financial grounds. King felt that while it was appropriate for Canada to be involved in operations in the Western Atlantic, taking on such a large financial responsibility was “quite another matter.” See Minutes of a Meeting of Cabinet War Committee, 10 June 1941, in *ibid*, 570.

¹⁰ Secretary of State for External Affairs to Governor of Newfoundland, 2 September 1939, in *Documents On Relations*, 41. See also Extract from a Speech by Prime Minister, 8 September 1939, in *Documents On Relations*, 43.

¹¹ Regardless, in September and November 1942, U-boats entered the anchorage and sank a total of four ships with significant loss of life.

¹² By the time the NEF arrived in May 1941, plans were already under way to install new fixed coastal and anti-aircraft defences in and around St. John’s. The 103rd Coast Battery, Royal Canadian Artillery, was to occupy three fortified positions – at Cape Spear with two 10-inch guns, Fort Amherst with two 4.7-inch guns, and Chain Rock with two 75mm guns and two 60-inch searchlights. For an extensive examination of Canada’s defensive presence in Newfoundland, including airport and coastal protection, see Robert Kavanagh, “W Force: The Canadian Army and the Defence of Newfoundland in the Second World War” (unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1995).



St. Lawrence, East Coast and Newfoundland Naval Bases (Naval Service of Canada, Volume 2; Tucker, G.N., Ottawa, 1952)

By early 1941 German submarines ranged further west towards Newfoundland in pursuit of the vital convoys that connected Britain with North America. Initially, in the fall of 1940, the Royal Navy escorted convoys to 22 degrees west, but as sinkings increased, Britain pushed this to 35 degrees west and occupied Iceland, both to deny it to the Germans and to use it as a refuelling point.¹³ On the Canadian side, the RCN, based out of Halifax, could only provide anti-submarine convoy escort by destroyers and smaller warships as far as the Grand Banks, leaving approximately 2000 kilometres for the convoys to travel unescorted against U-boat attack before being picked up by the Royal Navy. By establishing a forward base for relatively short-ranged anti-submarine warships at St. John's, the RN and RCN could extend anti-submarine protection to intersect with that provided from the new British base in Iceland.¹⁴

At the same time, in 1941, the Americans became a significant presence in Newfoundland, and Canadian suspicions as to their intentions grew as they watched US force levels increase steadily.¹⁵ Furthermore, the ABC1 (American British Conversations) agreement – signed without Canadian participation in early 1941 – granted strategic control of the Northwest Atlantic to the United States upon its entry into the war. Canadian authorities were not only unhappy at the prospect of a permanent American presence in Newfoundland but the RCN was also distressed that its more experienced forces would be under American direction.¹⁶ Canada needed both to impress upon its allies the “vital nature” of its interest in Newfoundland and to project itself on the world scene.¹⁷ As Malcolm Macleod points out, “Canada was determined to become a weighty presence in Newfoundland, both for the sake of winning the war and for future considerations.”¹⁸

When NSHQ received the Admiralty's query as to the number of new corvettes that could be contributed to a base in the “Newfoundland focal area”¹⁹ in May 1941, NSHQ surprised London by offering to establish the base itself.²⁰ The prospect of concentrating all of Canada's available naval forces in one area with a single well-defined objective, under a Canadian officer, was very attractive to the RCN.²¹ The Canadian defence minister J.L.

¹³ V.E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive, 1914-1945* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 101. See Appendix I.

¹⁴ Lt. Stuart Keats, “The Royal Canadian Navy in Newfoundland, 1940-1944,” 25 October 1944, DND, DHH, NHS 8000, 1.

¹⁵ W.A.B. Douglas, *The Creation of a National Air Force* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 383.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 386.

¹⁷ Minutes of a Meeting of Cabinet War Committee, 29 October 1941, in *Documents on Relations*, 110.

¹⁸ Malcolm Macleod, *Peace of the Continent* (St. John's, Nfld: Harry Cuff Publications, 1986), 18.

¹⁹ “Nfld. Convoy Escort Forces. Gen. Data and Correspondence,” NSHQ to Admiralty, 21 May 1941, Library and Archives of Canada (LAC), Record Group (RG) 24, vol 3892, NSS 1033-6-1, pt 1.

²⁰ “Nfld. Convoy Escort Forces. Gen. Data and Correspondence,” NSHQ to Admiralty, 29 May 1941, LAC, RG 24, vol 3892, NSS 1033-6-1, pt 1. See also W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty and Michael Whitby, *et al*, *No Higher Purpose: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939-1943*, Volume II, Part I (St. Catharines, Ont: Vanwell, 2002), 183.

²¹ Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada, Its Official History; Volume II: Activities on Shore During the Second World War* (Ottawa: King's Printers, 1952), 189.

Ralston suggested at a meeting of the War Cabinet that it offered the RCN the opportunity to play “an important and vital role in the Western Atlantic.”²² From the onset of the war, Canada had resisted any British attempt to subordinate its sovereignty and over-ride the autonomy of Canadian armed forces. Unlike the governments of the other Commonwealth and occupied nations, the Mackenzie King government had refused to have the RCN simply operate as part of the Royal Navy. The country’s small fleet had been built to protect its extensive coastline, and it was only the imminent threat of invasion of Britain by Germany in the spring of 1940 and the personal appeal of Prime Minister Winston Churchill that persuaded Prime Minister Mackenzie King to send Canada’s small destroyer force and the first ten newly-built corvettes to the eastern Atlantic. The creation of the NEF and the establishment of an RCN base at St. John’s entailed the return of the Canadian destroyers and corvettes from the eastern to the western Atlantic, which, although essential for the protection of Allied convoys against the westward thrust of the U-boats, could also be seen as a move directly related to the defence of Canada, something that appealed to King’s nationalist government.²³

Up to this point, Canada’s treatment by the US and Britain had been less than equal.²⁴ Even though the United States was neutral and the RCN had been in action since 1939, Canadian naval forces were slated to be under strategic control of the American flag officer stationed in Argentia, Newfoundland as soon as the US decided to enter the war. NSHQ hoped that by establishing a major escort base in St. John’s, and ensuring that the Naval Officer in Charge (NOIC) outranked his American counterpart, Canada could both strengthen its presence in Newfoundland and retain control over its own forces in its traditional waters. Consequently, as Marc Milner notes, the actual operational performance of the NEF was “less important in 1941 than the mere fact of its existence.”²⁵ The Newfoundland Commission of Government, however, was not as keen about having another foreign country occupy its territory.

Newfoundland’s treatment in the allocation of specific sites to the United States in the Anglo-American bases agreement of 27 March 1941 had left the Commission of Government with a bad taste in its mouth. These arrangements, the detailed follow up to the “destroyers for bases” agreement of 1940, were negotiated at the same time that President F.D. Roosevelt was pushing Congress to pass his Lend-Lease Bill, a measure urgently needed by Britain, and this had a serious impact on the negotiations for the bases in Newfoundland.²⁶ It was obvious from the start that the Americans had definite ideas as to what they wanted, and, knowing Britain’s desperate need for war materials, they pressed

²² Minutes of Meeting of Cabinet War Committee, 20 June 1941, in *Documents on Relations*, 572.

²³ “Nfld. Convoy Escort Force. Gen. Data and Correspondence”; Lt-Col K.S. Maclachlan, Assistant Deputy Minister of Naval Service, and Admiral P. Nelles, Chief of Naval Staff, “Notes for Minister of National Defence,” 1 July 1941, LAC, RG 24, vol 3892, NSS 1033-6-1, pt 1. See also C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1970), 311.

²⁴ Douglas, *et al*, *No Higher Purpose*, 172.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 93.

²⁶ The Lend-Lease Bill permitted the United States to provide war supplies to Great Britain without the latter having to pay for them. Up to this point, Britain had to pay for any supplies “cash and carry” and its foreign cash reserves were exhausted.

their advantage. Of particular concern to the Newfoundland government representatives was the “general powers” insisted upon by the Americans, which essentially granted the US total autonomy over the areas to be leased, giving it unprecedented authority over the property and inhabitants of a sovereign country.²⁷ The Newfoundland government had also hoped to acquire economic benefits from the United States as compensation for its contribution to the deal, but it was sadly disappointed. The best that was offered was the promise to “consider sympathetically” the development of mutual trade between the two countries.²⁸

Recognising “the considerable sacrifices” that the American plan could impose upon the inhabitants of Newfoundland, Winston Churchill addressed a personal plea to the Newfoundland representatives, L.E. Emerson and J.G. Pension, to accept the agreement as a matter of patriotic duty. This they did, even while telling their colleagues that the terms of the agreement were “one-sided throughout and often extremely harsh.” Nevertheless, in Newfoundland the Commission went to great lengths to present the agreement as fair and equitable, and the accord was accepted without serious incident once it was made public. Regardless, Newfoundland had taken “some hard diplomatic knocks” and this experience coloured the Commission’s attitude when it came to negotiating the establishment of the RCN base at St. John’s.²⁹

The Newfoundland government’s wariness of the Canadians actually predated the Anglo-American bases agreement. In August 1940, Prime Minister Mackenzie King and President Roosevelt met in Ogdensburg, New York, and agreed to form the Permanent Joint Board on Defence. One of the Board’s first duties was to produce a worst-case plan, code-named “Black,” in the event that Britain fell and North America lay open to Nazi attack. This plan included the occupation of Newfoundland.³⁰ Learning of the agreement second hand from the American mission investigating locations for the proposed bases, the Newfoundland Commission of Government complained to London that the Canadians were making plans without consulting the Newfoundland government.³¹ Consequently, when London proposed that the RCN establish a naval base at St. John’s, the Commission was somewhat hesitant.

The initial plans called for the Admiralty to establish facilities in St. John’s to accommodate thirty-six warships, of which about a quarter would be in port at any one time.³² The Newfoundland government would act as agents for London, and acquire the necessary land either through lease or purchase, and supply what manpower and materials it could.³³ As the majority of the vessels would be Canadian, an RCN commodore would be appointed Flag Officer, Newfoundland Force, but overall command would rest with Western Approaches Command in Liverpool. Ottawa initially offered to set up the base from its own resources, but the scope of the operation soon expanded and the estimated size of the force

²⁷ Peter Neary, “Newfoundland and the Anglo-American Leased Bases Agreement of 27 March 1941,” *Canadian Historical Review*, LXVII:4 (December 1986), 510.

²⁸ MacKenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle*, 51.

²⁹ Neary, “Newfoundland and the Anglo-American Leased Bases Agreement,” 508-514.

³⁰ Douglas, *The Creation of a National Air Force*, 383.

³¹ Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World*, 138.

³² Dominions Secretary to Governor of Newfoundland, 23 May 1941, in *Documents on Relations*, 560.

³³ *Ibid*, 561.

increased to sixty-three, of which sixteen would be expected to be in harbour at any one time.³⁴

The cost for procurement of the land and construction of necessary facilities for the expanded base came in at approximately ten million dollars. Confronted with this large figure, Ottawa had second thoughts about shouldering financial responsibility for the base and came up with a number of excuses to backtrack on its initial offer.³⁵ This caused considerable embarrassment to all parties and, faced with the prospect of serious delays as a result, the Admiralty diplomatically renewed its original proposal to underwrite the base, while welcoming any financial contribution from Canada.³⁶ Ottawa agreed, but expected Canada “to be given some interest in the new base for her outlay,” and insisted that no decision on the base after the war would be made without Canadian consultation.³⁷

For its part, the Newfoundland government felt it was preferable from “the point of view of the future of Newfoundland,” as well as popular support, for the base to be owned and operated by the Admiralty.³⁸ This became a moot point once the Canadian government withdrew its original offer. London suspected that the \$10 million estimate provided by the Newfoundland government probably reflected the local preference for British control and was intended to discourage the Canadians.³⁹ Unperturbed, the Admiralty accepted that the financial burden properly belonged to them, but also thought that some of the material and equipment needed could be obtained from the Americans through Lend-Lease.⁴⁰ Although the Admiralty would thus establish and retain ownership of the base, the RCN agreed to maintain and administer it. As Gilbert Tucker observed in *The Naval Service of Canada*, “The RCN in St. John’s was something like a tenant living free of rent in a house which he himself designed, of which he paid for upkeep, and in which members of the landlord’s family were welcome to take shelter.”⁴¹

Prior to the Admiralty’s urgent call for the creation of the new Newfoundland Escort Force for transatlantic operations in May 1941, plans had been limited to the installation of port defences at St John’s, and the development of a small base for the Newfoundland Defence Force, comprising five corvettes, two minesweepers and four Fairmile patrol boats, all from the RCN, for coastal defence patrols and coastal escort duties.⁴² The Naval Officer in Charge, (NOIC) Captain C.M.R. Schwerdt, RN, made arrangements to install an anti-torpedo baffle at the entrance to the harbour, and develop an Examination Service (to make sure no incoming merchant vessel was a disguised enemy raider) using two former Newfoundland Customs Cutters, the *Marvita* and *Shulamite*, complete with their crews.⁴³ A

³⁴ NSHQ to Admiralty, 29 May 1941, in *ibid*, 565.

³⁵ Minutes of a Meeting of Cabinet War Committee, 20 June 1941, in *ibid*, 571-574.

³⁶ Minute, H.N. Morrison, Head of Military Branch, 27 July 1941, Admiralty Minute Series M.09812/41, The National Archives [TNA/PRO], Kew, UK, ADM 116/ 4387.

³⁷ Minutes of a Meeting of Cabinet War Committee, 15 July 1941, in *Documents on Relations*, 584.

³⁸ Governor of Newfoundland to Dominions Secretary, 6 June 1941, in *ibid*, 568.

³⁹ Memo, Military Branch, 20 July 1941, Admiralty Minute Series M.01127/41, TNA, ADM 116/4387.

⁴⁰ Minute, 17 June 1941, Admiralty Minute Series M.09406/41, TNA, ADM 116/4387.

⁴¹ Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada (II)*, 192.

⁴² CCNF to NSHQ, 30 June 1941, DND, DHH, FOMR, NSS-1000-5-20, vol I.

⁴³ Capt Schwedt had been serving as the Governor’s Private Secretary and took over as Naval Officer In

4000-tonne Admiralty fuel tank was being constructed, and plans were under way for the erection of a Port War Signal Station (whose role was to identify all incoming warships as friend or foe) at Cape Spear along with a High Frequency Direction Finding (Huff Duff) station and a radio beacon.⁴⁴ In addition, Cabot Tower was manned as a Port War Signal Station by one RCN Leading Signaller and five ratings, and Fort Amherst was employed as an Examination Battery (to open fire on any ship that did not cooperate with the examination vessels) and was manned by four RCN signallers.⁴⁵ This battery was completed by the Canadian Army by the fall of 1941, but in the interim four mobile 155-millimetre guns and two 8-inch railway guns, manned by American troops, were installed in and around St. John’s.⁴⁶

By the time Commodore L.W. Murray arrived as Commodore Commanding, Newfoundland Force, in June 1941, there had been some important changes. All the ships originally allocated had arrived – six Royal Canadian Navy destroyers and seventeen corvettes, and seven Royal Navy destroyers and four corvettes.⁴⁷ But the most important change was the evolving convoy escort organization. Convoys assembled at Bedford Basin, and Halifax-based escorts took them to the Western Ocean Meeting Point (WOMP) just east of the Grand Banks. The NEF then took them across the western and central Atlantic to the Mid-Ocean Meeting Point (MOMP) off Iceland. There RN escorts took over, and the NEF warships refuelled in Iceland, and then pick up a westbound convoy from Britain, and proceed to the WOMP where the warships of the NEF would then proceed to St. John’s for rest and re-victualling.

During July 1941, the NEF was organized into twelve escort groups – eleven for convoy escort and one comprised of fast warships for special convoy escort, mainly of troopships – and an operational schedule set out based on a 110-day cycle.⁴⁸ Even so, while twenty-one convoys were escorted during August without losses, Admiral Murray felt that the forces assigned to each convoy (no fewer than four escorts) were insufficient.⁴⁹ He also pointed out in his monthly report that many changes were made within the groups as a result of casualties and refits. On the positive side, joint RCN/RCAF operations commenced, with an RCAF operations room being set up next to RCN Operations. RCAF patrols were also extended to include convoy reconnaissance.

August also saw Prime Minister Churchill aboard the British battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* meet with President Roosevelt in Placentia Bay for discussions that produced the “Atlantic Charter” of Allied war aims in the event that the US should become a combatant. Ships of the NEF provided both escort for the *Prince of Wales* and anti-submarine protection

Charge at the start of hostilities.

⁴⁴ CCNF to NSHQ, 30 June 1941, DND, DHH, FOMR, NSS-1000-5-20, vol I.

⁴⁵ Lt-Cdr R.U. Langston RCNR (for NOIC) to NSHQ, 31 March 1941, DND, DHH, Monthly Report on Proceedings, NSS-1000-5-13.5.

⁴⁶ Roger Sarty, *The Maritime Defence of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996), 155.

⁴⁷ Tony German, *The Sea Is At Our Gates* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), 90-91.

⁴⁸ Murray to NSHQ and CinCWA, July 1941, DND, DHH, FOMR, NSS-1000-5-20, vol I.

⁴⁹ Murray to NSHQ and CinCWA, August 1941, DND, DHH, FOMR, NSS-1000-5-20, vol I.

while the armada was at anchor.⁵⁰ As a result of this conference, the USN assumed strategic control over the Western Atlantic and took over the escort of all HX convoys and fast westbound convoys, leaving the slow SC convoys for the RCN. To facilitate this, meetings were held between Admiral Murray and his staff, and the Commander Task Force 24, *Argentia*, Admiral A.L. Bristol, USN, and his staff. It soon became evident that the NEF did not have the forces, most particularly destroyers, to protect the SC convoys properly, and the Admiralty agreed to detail five RN destroyers and seven corvettes to assist.⁵¹

In October 1941, Murray declared to headquarters in Ottawa that the reputation of the RCN rested on the “success or failure of the NEF.”⁵² Captain G.L. Stephens, the Engineer-in-Chief at headquarters appreciated that, but was only too aware, given the shortages of equipment and personnel the RCN faced, that the situation was one of attempting to “match urgent need with unpromising circumstance.” He felt that St. John’s could not be “considered as normally suitable as a base for a large naval force.”⁵³ As Tony German observed, St. John’s really did have just “the leanest of facilities.”⁵⁴ The harbour was small, only 700 metres wide and roughly two kilometres long, and had to be shared with Newfoundland’s substantial mercantile fleet.⁵⁵ Support facilities were minimal, although there were fuel tanks on the Southside, and the Newfoundland Dockyard was situated at the head of the harbour. The harbour front itself was a tangle of fishing stages, ships’ storehouses and finger piers, most of which were in decay, and the Americans had already leased a large portion of what was available. Nevertheless, Stephens came up with a plan that provided over 7000 linear feet of jetty space in a harbour that the Admiralty delegation had already concluded could not accommodate any more than twenty-four escort and auxiliary craft.⁵⁶ The Canadian plan suggested that at least fifty-five vessels could be accommodated in St. John’s harbour.⁵⁷ The plan eventually proposed to include: fuel tankage and an underground magazine on the Southside; a 1000-man barracks; a 250-bed hospital; two Port War Signal Stations at Fort Amherst and Care Spear; and a radio station in Mt. Pearl.⁵⁸

By the fall of 1941, initial shoreline developments were underway, and the 70-odd warships of the NEF were fully operational. Commodore Murray directed operations from

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Murray to NSHQ and CinCWA, September 1941, DND, DHH, FOMR, NSS-1000-5-20, vol I.

⁵² As quoted in Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run* (2nd ed, Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1990), 64.

⁵³ Report, Engineer-in-Chief to CNS, Ottawa, 9 June 1941, DND, DHH 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1).

⁵⁴ German, *The Sea Is At Our Gates*, 93.

⁵⁵ As Newfoundland’s main port, St. John’s supplied all the communities spread all along the Island’s considerable coastline, as well as in Labrador.

⁵⁶ A joint Admiralty/Ministry of War Transportation mission headed by E.A. Seal, senior official of the Admiralty Delegation in Washington, visited St. John’s in early June 1941 to see to the legal and technical details of co-ordinating escort group operations with mercantile repairs. See Bernard Ransom, “Canada’s ‘Newfyjohn’ Tenancy: The Royal Canadian Navy in St. John’s 1941-1945,” *Acadiensis*, XXIII:2 (Spring 1994), 53-55; and, Reports, R-Adm Sheridan and Adm Bonham-Carter to NOIC, St. John’s, dated 5 June 1941 and 4 June 1941, DND, DHH 81/520/1440-166/25

⁵⁷ Admiralty to CinCWA, CinC Home Fleet, CNS, 4 June 1941, LAC, RG 24, vol 3892, NSS 1033-6-1, pt.1

⁵⁸ Ransom, “Canada’s ‘Newfyjohn’ Tenancy,” 55. See also MacKenzie, *Inside the Atlantic Triangle*, 71.

the upper floors of the Newfoundland Hotel, and the ships of the NEF were tied up on the Southside, or in the middle of the harbour, being serviced by the depot ship HMS *Greenwich*, the fleet supply ship *City of Dieppe*, and the oilers *Teakwood* and *Clam*. At the time, this was only considered a temporary measure until the US assumed its full responsibilities in the Western Atlantic. As it turned out, rather than overshadowing the NEF, American entry into the war transformed the stop-gap measure into an escort base of strategic importance.

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the USN pulled most of its escort forces out of the Atlantic for duty in the Pacific.⁵⁹ Admiral Murray’s command, reinforced from the RN’s overstretched pool of escorts, was forced to supply all the trans-Atlantic escort forces in the western ocean.⁶⁰ The NEF was renamed the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF) in February 1942 and, in addition to oceanic escort, Murray also had to release escorts for convoy duty further south.⁶¹ The result put unbearable strain on the ships and facilities at St. John’s.

The MOEF could only maintain the required convoy schedule through strict adherence to the more direct Great Circle Route, which prevented significant detours around known U-boat concentrations. The tighter schedule affected crew morale because of the shorter layover time between crossings, and team cohesion and continuity as a result of ship substitution within escort groups.⁶² Breakdowns became more frequent as the greater wear and tear in the harsh North Atlantic was exacerbated by much higher repair defects from the overstretched facilities in St. John’s.⁶³ More drydock facilities were desperately needed.

The docking facilities for escort vessels had concerned the naval planners from the beginning. Naval vessels already had priority at the graving dock operated by the Newfoundland Railway, and from November 1941 to March 1942 they occupied an average of fourteen days out of the twenty-four worked each month. As 1942 progressed, it became clear that the drydock situation placed serious constraints on the utility of St. John’s as an escort base. During the fall, use of the dock increased dramatically, accounting for seventy-five percent of total docking time, compared to twenty-six percent during the same period in 1941.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Only two US Coast Guard cutters remained for transatlantic escort duty.

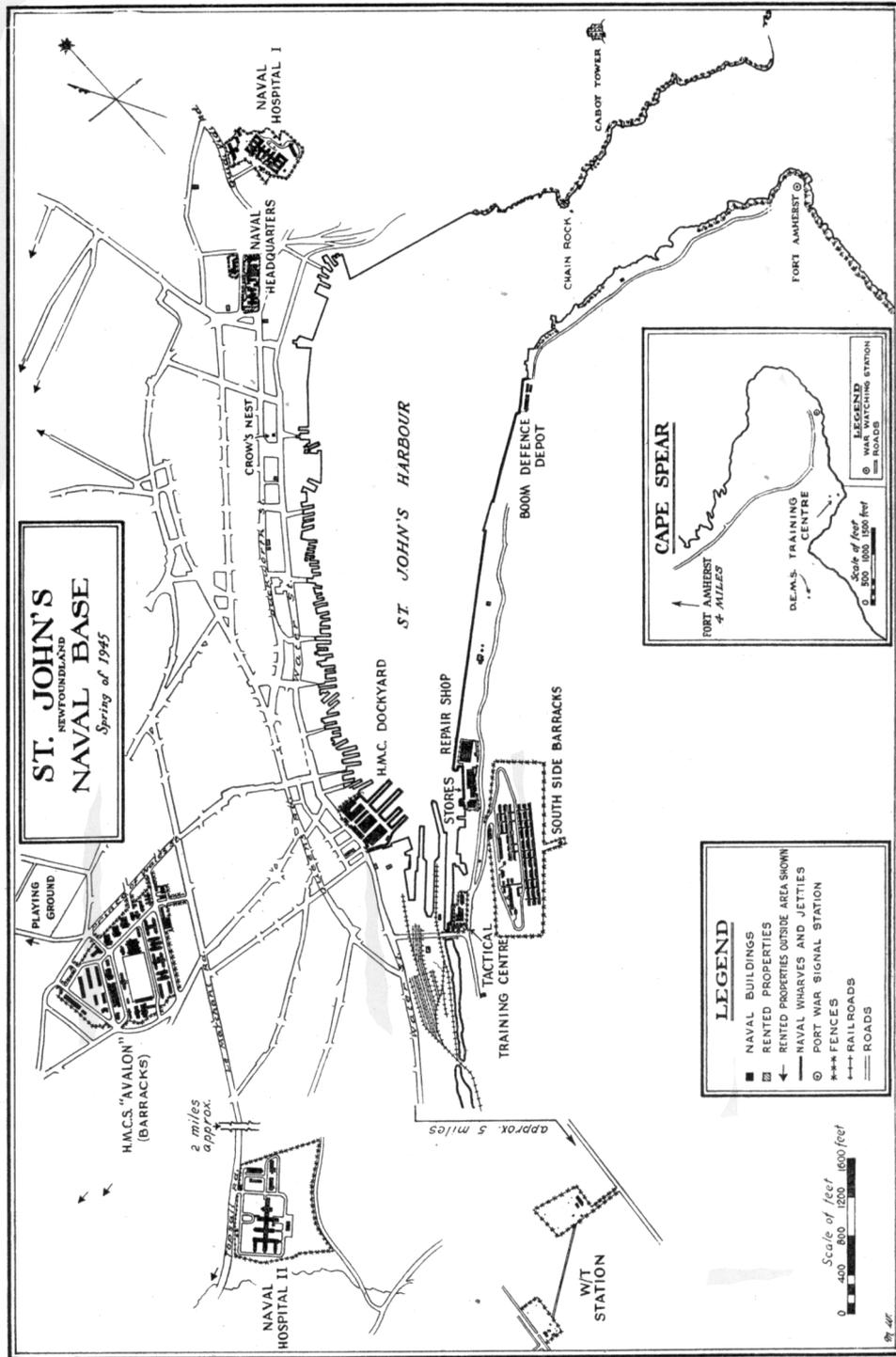
⁶⁰ Murray’s promotion to rear-admiral in December 1941, making him equal in rank to the Commanding Officer, Atlantic Coast (COAC), situated in Halifax, gives some indication of the importance NSHQ placed on the Newfoundland station. However, while Murray reported directly to NSHQ for administrative and disciplinary matters, he was dependant upon the COAC for manning, a situation that caused some friction between the two commands.

⁶¹ By May 1942, the RCN was also escorting Canadian-flagged tankers to and from the Caribbean as a result of the carnage being wrought there and along the American eastern seaboard by U-boats. See Douglas, *et al*, *No Higher Purpose*, 412; and Robert C. Fisher, “‘We’ll Get Our Own’: Canada and the Oil Shipping Crisis of 1942,” *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord*, III:2 (April 1993), 33-39.

⁶² Ransom, “Canada’s ‘Newfyjohn’ Tenancy,” 60.

⁶³ CCNF to NSHQ, 22 November 1941, LAC, RG 24, vol 3892, NSS 1033-6-1, pt 1.

⁶⁴ Of the 48 days worked by the dock in September and October, 36 were taken up with naval usage.



St. John's, Newfoundland, Naval Base, Spring of 1945 (Naval Service of Canada, Volume 2; Tucker, G.N., Ottawa, 1952)

It is interesting that the drydock crisis occurred when the forces at St. John’s were actually decreasing as a result of the redeployment of sixteen MOEF escorts for the Torch landings in North Africa. From a peak of seventy vessels in January 1942, the MOEF fell to about sixty by mid-year, levelling out to fifty in January 1943.⁶⁵ Two expedients were investigated to relieve the situation. The first was the acquisition of a floating dock, and the second was the development of an overflow facility at Bay Bulls, located approximately thirty kilometres south of St. John’s.

The British Admiralty Delegation had tried to find a floating dock in Canada throughout 1942, but with little luck. The closest they came was the smaller section of the Vickers Montreal Dock that was sixty-one metres long with a lifting capacity of 7100 tonnes. This request had been turned down by NSHQ, as new construction was considered the overriding priority and the dock could not be spared.⁶⁶ By the fall/winter of 1942-43, the docking problem had reached crisis proportions, manifested by unacceptably long delays in repairs and the corresponding incidence of missed sailings. Finally, in September 1943 the USN was able to provide an 1800-tonne lifting capacity floating dock from Perth Amboy, New Jersey. In the meantime, the overflow facility at Bay Bulls was being developed.

Engineer-in-Chief Captain G.L. Stephens’ original nominee for an overflow site, Harbour Grace, was rejected by NSHQ as being too costly to develop.⁶⁷ In its stead, Bay Bulls was chosen, and in July 1942 the Canadian War Cabinet approved the project at a total cost of \$3 million (\$2 million for the haul-out and support facilities, and \$1 million for harbour protection).⁶⁸ The Newfoundland Commission of Government committed to a contribution of \$300,000, part of which was the acquisition cost of the site itself. General construction contracts were let in the fall of 1942, but final completion was not anticipated before the end of 1943.⁶⁹ In any event, these two developments did not cure the problems of maintenance and repair at St. John’s.

By March 1943, the average number of escorts at HMCS *Avalon* at any one time numbered twenty-five. In that month alone, 143 escorts were serviced, of which eleven required docking, and base facilities completed 2300 repairs. Regardless, the facilities at St. John’s had reached their saturation point. Even after almost two years’ operation, the base was still severely lacking in machine tools and light engineering plants. In addition, workshops lacked the necessary lathes to effect engineering repairs, and basic foundry work could not be done onshore due to a lack of such essential equipment as power hammers.⁷⁰ The machine shop, smithy, and foundry facilities on the Southside were considered “a fire hazard,” and the electrical shop was “poorly equipped... and working under adverse conditions.” The RCN Dockyard located on the Northside suffered similar deficiencies;

⁶⁵ Tucker, *Naval Service (II)*, 203. See also Ransom, “Canada’s ‘Newfyjohn’ Tenancy,” 58-61.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁶⁷ CCNF to NSHQ, 30 June 1941, DND, DHH, FOMR, NSS-1000-5-20, vol I.

⁶⁸ High Commissioner in Newfoundland to Commissioner for Public Utilities, 18 August 1942, in *Documents on Relations*, 603-4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 606.

⁷⁰ Minute M.012347/42, DND, DHH, ADM 116/4540, and Notes by Admiralty M. Branch, 23 September 1942.

some machinery still had to rely on a temporary power supply, as the main switch panel was incomplete; the welding equipment and stand-by generators were lacking rectifiers; and, while needed motor compressors had arrived, there was no power supply available to operate than.⁷¹ Furthermore, in the high technology aspects of anti-submarine warfare, HMCS *Avalon* was severally deficient in facilities to repair and upgrade advanced electronic equipment such as radar, HF/DF, and ASDIC.⁷² As James Lamb observes in *The Corvette Navy*, the RCN base in St. John's was almost "more a state of mind than actual substance."⁷³

In April 1943, the Admiralty delegation – still led by the committee's Admiralty representative, E.A. Seal – travelled to St. John's and met with senior NSHQ officials to plan improvements to the base.⁷⁴ To maintain the build up of forces in Britain for an invasion of Fortress Europe, St. John's needed to be able to service the maximum number of escorts with minimal turnaround time. This figure was set at fifty and required "major new construction and reorganization of the base repair capacity." In his report, Seal recommended that a new machine shop complex be constructed on the Southside to provide heavy engineering plant, smithy, and foundry facilities, and a new naval stores building be installed on an adjacent piece of land. The current Dockyard storehouse would then be converted to a light engineering/electronic shop to handle electronic navigational and anti-submarine equipment repairs. The plan also called for a new, 1000-square metre harbour craft/boat repair shop with haul-out, plus an eighty-vehicle garage for the existing barracks complex. In addition, a new 250-bed hospital would be built in the city's West End.

Training facilities were also part of the plan, and included classroom and signal training space provided by an annex to the Southside barracks. Elaborate simulator trainers, including an anti-aircraft dome teacher and tactical anti-submarine attack teacher, would also be installed on an adjacent site.⁷⁵ Furthermore, a Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship (DEMS) training range would be located on the cliffs at Cape Spear, and when completed in 1944 mounted both anti-aircraft and larger calibre practice artillery pieces. Harbour defences would be beefed up, with the controlled minefield in the Narrows upgraded and enlarged, and a fully equipped boom defence depot built at the Admiralty's wharfage on the Southside. Seal's report estimated that these new facilities necessitated an increase in personnel at St. John's of 1500 ratings (mainly tradesmen) and 850 servicewomen.⁷⁶ (The cost of the expansion program was \$7 million, which brought the total Canadian investment in the base at St. John's to \$16 million.⁷⁷)

⁷¹ Reports on St. John's Repair Facilities, DSR to CNEC, Ottawa, 19 April 1943, DND, DHH 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1).

⁷² HF/DF stood for High Frequency Direction Finding, a method of locating U-boats by triangulating their radio signals to U-boat Command. ASDIC equipment, now called SONAR, sent out a sound pulse underwater much like radar, and a return echo would indicate the presence of a submerged submarine. See also Ransom, "Canada's 'Newfyjohn' Tenancy," 64.

⁷³ James B. Lamb, *The Corvette Navy* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977), 52.

⁷⁴ D.B. Carswell, Controller of Ship Repairs and Salvage to A.J. Martin, Department of Munitions and Supply, 27 April 1943, LAC, RG 25, Series 62, vol 3198, file 5206-40.

⁷⁵ Seal to Admiralty, Report on Repair Facilities, 7 April 1943, DND, DHH 81/520/1440-166/25 II (1).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Minutes of a Meeting of Cabinet War Committee, 16 April 1943, in *Documents on Relations*, 616-17.

April also saw Malcolm MacDonald, the British High Commissioner to Ottawa, suggest that a combined Canadian, British and United States committee be established “to examine repair problems for warships and merchant ships” in the north-western Atlantic. Recognising Newfoundland’s importance in this area, MacDonald recommended that Government of Newfoundland representatives should be included in this committee.⁷⁸ Canada’s High Commissioner to Newfoundland, Charles J. Burchell agreed, suggesting that one area of improvement was the operation of the Newfoundland dockyard which, he contended, was only working one shift per day and was closed on Sundays and holidays. As a result, he pointed out, despite the extreme pressure on repair facilities at St. John’s, the dockyard was actually “idle” for a total of ninety-five days per year. Burchell argued that it should operate two, if not three, shifts per day during the whole year and work all except a few holidays.⁷⁹ On 12 August 1943, the committee met in Ottawa under the chairmanship of (now) Rear-Admiral G.L. Stephens, with Sir Wilfred Woods representing the Government of Newfoundland. During the discussions, Woods stressed the necessity of reserving the Newfoundland Dockyard for the repair of merchant ships, as, due to its close proximity to the convoy routes, it was “the natural port of refuge for damaged and defective ships.” The committee agreed in principle, but also recognized that there were times when naval vessels had to take precedence. At any rate, there was a shortage of skilled labour in Newfoundland and only running repairs could be completed as it was, refits of warships having to be undertaken in British or American ports. To help alleviate this problem, the committee recommended that a new floating dock of no less than 3000 tonnes and capable of handling the largest escort vessel replace the 1800-tonne dock recently acquired from the US as soon as possible, and that the labour force at the Newfoundland Dockyard be augmented with skilled labour from Britain “without delay.” The committee also recommended that planned improvements to the naval facilities at St. John’s “be completed and manned as quickly as possible.”⁸⁰

By the end of 1943 the tide of battle had changed in the Atlantic. In May, when 41 U-boats were sunk and Admiral Karl Dönitz pulled all but a few of his boats out of the Atlantic, the initiative had passed to the Allies. While the U-boats did return to the battle with heavier air defences and new weapons and sensors, losses soared as successes plunged. Finally in January 1944, Dönitz abandoned his patrol lines, and boats once again became lone wolves, attacking victims of opportunity. Nevertheless, this did not mean that the battle was over. Convoys still sailed and needed protection against an increasingly wily and unpredictable enemy.⁸¹ An average of seventy warships remained based at St. John’s, a force

⁷⁸ Malcolm MacDonald, High Commissioner for the United Kingdom to A. Robertson, Under-Secretary for External Affairs, Ottawa, 12 April 1943, LAC, RG 25, Series 62, vol 3198, file 5206-40.

⁷⁹ C.J. Burchell, High Commissioner for Canada, St. John’s, to Scott MacDonald, Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, 16 April 1943, LAC, RG 25, Series 62, vol 3198, file 5206-40.

⁸⁰ Minutes of Combined Canadian, United Kingdom and United States Committee to Examine Repair Problem for Warships and Merchant Vessels on the East Coast of Canada and Newfoundland, 12 August 1943, LAC, RG 28, vol 129, file C-3-21, 3-7.

⁸¹ With the introduction of the *schnorkel* – a retractable valved tube that reached the surface when a U-boat was at periscope depth and supplied the sub’s engines with air – sightings of U-boats drastically dropped.

roughly the same size as the original NEF at its peak in January 1942. This time, however, the force consisted of mostly the newer River-class anti-submarine frigates and increased endurance corvettes, plus a fair representation of Canada's destroyer fleet. By now, the RCN had assumed almost complete responsibility for trans-Atlantic trade protection and, although some expansion plans were cancelled as the war wound down,⁸² "Newfyjohn" provided a reasonably organized and relatively well-equipped maintenance, training, and support base until the end of the war.⁸³

During the course of the Second World War, St. John's evolved from merely a defended harbour to become the most important base developed by the Royal Canadian Navy in the Northwest Atlantic during the war.⁸⁴ The RCN had set up six other naval bases on the east coast during this period: Montreal, Quebec City, and Gaspé in Québec; Saint John, New Brunswick; and Shelbourne and Sydney in Nova Scotia. These can be generally classified into two groups; those that serviced merchant ships and non-operational warships, and those that provided for the repair and re-supply of operational warships. The bases at Montréal, Québec and Saint John fell under the first category, and the facilities at Gaspé, Shelbourne and Sydney under the second. As an indication of its pre-eminence among the other bases, HMCS *Avalon* encompassed the two groups, servicing merchant ships and both operational and non-operational warships.

Newfoundland required a fairly large mercantile fleet to service the many towns and communities spread out along its considerable shoreline. As the main port on the island, St. John's was the assembly point for these local convoys, as well as those travelling to Halifax, Sydney, and Labrador. During the first five months of 1942, 298 ships were convoyed between St. John's and various ports.⁸⁵ Of course, these convoys needed escort protection, too, and St. John's was also home to the local Newfoundland Defence Force. Furthermore, St. John's was the location of the only drydock and haul-out facilities in Newfoundland until Bay Bulls was completed in 1944, although the Americans did agree to allow RCN and RN forces to use its floating docks at Argentia.⁸⁶ While RCN warships had priority over

Furthermore, U-boat captains – knowing that the Allies could detect their signals – only contacted U-boat command when absolutely necessary. These combined to make the lone wolf U-boat very hard to track until it attacked.

⁸² Most notable of the cancellations were the planned improvements to relieve congestion at the RCN Dockyard.

⁸³ Ransom, "Canada's 'Newfyjohn' Tenancy," 69.

⁸⁴ This does not include Halifax, which had been an established naval base since before the First World War. Halifax was, and remains, Canada's most important Atlantic naval base, and from April 1943 the headquarters of the Canadian Northwest Atlantic Command. All of the RCN's other wartime bases were sub-commands of Halifax. However, as an indication of its ranking with Halifax, HMCS *Avalon* was the only RCN base developed during the war in which the commanding officer held the title of Flag Officer Commanding.

⁸⁵ FONF to NSHQ, January-May 1942, DND, DHH, FOMR, NSS-1000-5-20, vol I.

⁸⁶ Minutes of Combined Canadian, United Kingdom and United States Committee to Examine Repair Problem for Warships and Merchant Vessels on the East Coast of Canada and Newfoundland, 12 August 1943, LAC, RG 28, vol 129, file C-3-21, 3. Unfortunately, even though the repair/refit facilities at Argentia were only operating at 75 per cent workload, the Admiralty reserved them for the exclusive use of British escort groups, limiting RCN access to only those ships that "require[d] assistance in an Emergency." Orders

merchant ship repair at the Newfoundland Dockyard, this did not mean that merchant ship repairs were not carried out in quantity during the war years. As Sir Wilfred Woods impressed upon the Allied ship repair committee that met in Ottawa in August 1943, St. John’s was the natural port of refuge for many weather and battle damaged merchant vessels.

According to a report produced by the RCN, on one day alone – 31 January 1941 – there were fifty-three merchant ships taking refuge in St. John’s Harbour.⁸⁷ Canada’s High Commissioner to Newfoundland observed in April 1943 that, during the eighteen months he had been in Newfoundland, there had not been “a single day in which not one, but a number of merchant ships [had] been waiting to get in to the drydock.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, as a port of refuge, St. John’s was also a safe haven for survivors. Between June 1942 and May 1943, 2976 survivors arrived in St. John’s. Estimates are that upwards of 6000 survivors were cared for in St. John’s between 1939 and 1944.⁸⁹

HMCS *Avalon* also provided for the working up and refresher training of many of the RCN’s recently commissioned ships.⁹⁰ This is reflected in the anti-submarine and DEMS training facilities included in the 1943 expansion plans. By the end of hostilities, the Tactical Training Centre in St. John’s contained the Anti-Submarine School, the Gunnery School, the Radar School and Loran⁹¹ School, plus a Night Escort Teacher (NET). A report issued in June 1945 indicates that, on 6 April 1945 alone, fifty-one classes were taught between 0900 and 1730. These consisted of thirty-five Gunnery, eleven A/S, one radar, two Loran, and two NET classes, which included the use of the Depth Charge Driller.⁹² Regardless, St. John’s primary, and most important, responsibility was the supply and maintenance of the trans-Atlantic escorts that facilitated the vital convoys feeding the Allied war effort in Europe. Between January 1942 and May 1945, 545 escorts were stationed at St. John’s, not including motor launches. During the same period, the number of personnel serving at St. John’s rose from under one thousand people to over five thousand by war’s end, the most of any of Canada’s naval bases excluding Halifax.⁹³ Furthermore, of all the RCN’s escort bases, Canada spent the most on the base at St. John’s at \$16,000,000. The closest to St. John’s was Sydney, Cape Breton, at \$12,000,000.⁹⁴ These two points alone would seem to indicate the importance NSHQ placed on HMCS *Avalon* in the Canadian naval base system.

issued by the RN Maintenance Office in February 1943, as cited in Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, 219.

⁸⁷ Keats, “The Royal Canadian Navy in Newfoundland, 1940-1944,” 23.

⁸⁸ Burchell to Scott MacDonal, 16 April 1943, LAC, RG 25, Series 62, vol 3198, file 5206-40.

⁸⁹ Keats, “The Royal Canadian Navy in Newfoundland, 1940-1944,” 25.

⁹⁰ Working up practices were discontinued in late 1942 when Pictou and St. Margaret’s Bay, Nova Scotia came into use. Refresher training continued to the end of the war. See “Harbour Training in St. John’s – Summary of General Development,” 28 June 1945, DND, DHH, NHS 8000, 1-6.

⁹¹ Long Range Navigation. The Loran system utilized phase comparison radio signals to aid in navigation.

⁹² “Harbour Training in St. John’s – Summary of General Development,” 28 June 1945, DND, DHH, NHS 8000, 1-6.

⁹³ Tucker, *Naval Service (II)*, 531.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Ultimately, Canada and Newfoundland found it easy and mutually beneficial to cooperate with one another.⁹⁵ Military spending helped to pull Newfoundland out of its pre-war financial quagmire, and in return, the civilian population extended an unexpected hospitality to the members of the Royal Canadian Navy. Residents opened their homes to the thousands of young men stationed in St. John's during the war years, and churches and civic groups did their best to entertain the men during their, all too brief, rest periods in port.⁹⁶ Unlike Halifax, where friction between naval personnel and the civilian populace was longstanding, there were no VE-Day riots in St. John's.⁹⁷ By that time, Newfoundland's suspicions about Canada's intentions in 1941 had dissipated, and in 1949, the country relinquished its independent status and joined the Canadian federation.

More than any other Canadian escort base, Saint John's facilitated the "safe and timely arrival" of the Atlantic convoys from the darkest hours of the Battle of the Atlantic right up to the end of the war. Unlike the RCN's other bases, whose responsibilities diminished in the closing months of the war, the facilities in St. John's continued to improve until the last U-boat surfaced and raised the black flag over its conning tower. Even though St. John's was initially conceived to be at most a local defence facility, the port became one of the most important Allied naval bases established in the North Atlantic during the Second World War.

⁹⁵ MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent*, 19.

⁹⁶ During the 1637 days it operated, The Caribou Hut in St. John's rented 253,551 beds, served 1,545,766 meals, and hosted 1518 movies, 459 dances, 395 shows, and 205 Sunday night sing-songs with a total attendance in excess of 700,000 people. Margaret Duley, *The Caribou Hut* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1949), 28.

⁹⁷ R.H. Caldwell, "The VE-Day Riots in Halifax, 7-8 May 1945," *The Northern Mariner / Le Marin du nord*, X:1 (January 2000), 3-20.