

No Higher Purpose

A Special Review Section

Dean Allard and Marc Milner

In May of this year the first installment - volume 2, part 1 - of the new official history of the Royal Canadian Navy was published. It was launched with due ceremony at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa. The editors of *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* felt it entirely appropriate that such a work of an integral part of Canada's maritime history be given an extensive review. We had hoped to be able to offer you three reviews, namely two by distinguished English-language scholars, and one by a French-language scholar of the French edition of the work. Regrettably that last named is not available; rather than delay the English language reviews of this important work, we offer them here in this special section. When the French-language review is available, it will be specially presented.

Our reviewers are both well known in the international community of naval history and need no further introduction here. Their different careers and nationality offer interesting perspectives on the book. In alphabetical order they are Dean Allard, who retired as the Director of the US Naval Historical Center and Marc Milner, now a professor at the University of New Brunswick.

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 11, Parti.* St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Limited, www.vanwell.ca, 2003. xix + 664 pp., maps, illustrations, photographs, glossary, index. \$60.00, cloth; ISBN 1-55125-061-6.

The concept for this volume originated more than sixty years ago when Gilbert Tucker became the Royal Canadian Navy's official World War II historian. Tucker published and collected much information on his subject. But he wisely deferred writing the RCN's operational history until he could obtain access to the records of enemy naval forces and the highly classified Allied intelligence files. In the latter 1980s, by which time these sources were available, the present authors - all of them associated with Canada's Department of National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage - assumed Tucker's task.

Our long wait is rewarded with an outstanding addition to the literature on the Second World War. *No Higher Purpose* is rich in operational detail not only for the RCN, but also for the Royal, US, and German Navies, and to some extent for the Imperial Japanese Navy. The book rests squarely on exhaustive research in the official records of those nations, as well as discerning use of the leading secondary literature.

Alec Douglas and his associates present useful information on Canada's contributions to the campaigns in the North Pacific, Caribbean, and in North African waters.

But the backbone of this book is its account and analysis of the anti-submarine war in the North Atlantic. The authors are especially graphic in recounting a number of close-in and often brutal actions between R C N ships and German or Italian submarines. From 1939 to the spring of 1943, when *No Higher Purpose* ends, these deadly surface battles resulted in the destruction of thirteen enemy submarines and the loss of five R C N vessels. Additional losses on both sides resulted from air attacks, sea mines, and maritime accidents.

The tactics of the U-boat war are recounted in a masterful fashion. It is demonstrated, for example, that a typical dilemma faced by an escort commanders was whether to detach one of his ships to make a sustained attack on a submarine contact, or to maximize the defence of his convoy by keeping the screen intact. The use of star shells to locate submarines moving toward a formation presented another difficult choice since those illumination rounds also could reveal a convoy's location to the enemy.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that air cover was of indispensable importance in inhibiting submarine operations. German respect for the dangers posed by this means of attack was indicated by the efforts of Admiral Doenitz, the overall U-boat commander, to concentrate operations in areas outside the range of Allied aviation. Nor is there any question about the decisive nature of the weather on both friend and foe. High seas and gale winds often forced the cessation of operations by both sides. These conditions, by themselves, could inflict serious damage on surface and underwater vessels. Fog was another type of navigational hazard, even though it sometimes saved convoys from enemy discovery.

It must be appreciated, however, that *No Higher Purpose* is more than a tactical narrative. In a commendable effort to put the Canadian war at sea in perspective, the authors introduce readers to the strategic thinking of Allied political and military leaders. The authors' use of many revealing communications between American, British, and Canadian senior officials add a great deal to our knowledge of their overall outlook on the Battle of the Atlantic. Those sources also reveal the tensions that sometimes arose between the three Allied nations. At the same time the internal politics of Canada - notably the continuing debate between using Dominion forces for home defence instead of deploying them to distant waters - is an important feature in *No Higher Purpose*. Further, readers will benefit from learned discussions of ship construction, personnel training, and advances in electronic technology, all of which contributed significantly to the success or failure of Canadian forces.

There is so much rich and insightful material in this history that it is difficult to single out other topics that deserve special comment. But this American reviewer must confess his amazement in reading the book's description of the tiny size of the Canadian Navy when war broke out in Europe in 1939. At that time, the R C N had only ten modern warships. The Navy's permanent, professional force numbered less than 1600 officers and ratings. The Canadian naval establishment of 1939 was heavily dependent upon the Royal Navy for guidance, training, and other support.

It is customary - if not entirely accurate - for American historians to lament the lack of US Naval capabilities at the start of World War II due to the inattention of the nation's politicians during the interwar years. But this volume makes abundantly clear that, whatever problems Washington faced, the USN was light years ahead of Canada in the availability of personnel, ships, and weapons.

No Higher Purpose proceeds to present an insightful account of Canada's effective efforts after 1939 to create a large and modern fleet capable of navigating the cruel North Atlantic seas while countering the enemy submarine foe. Corvettes, built in Canadian yards to a British design, became the backbone of the Dominion's blue water navy. Little more than 200 feet in length, those vessels originally were intended for coastal operations. But they were pressed immediately into service on the North Atlantic shipping lanes.

The development of a major Canadian naval force, becoming gradually less dependent on the Royal Navy, was a remarkable achievement. But, despite Canada's active and generally successful participation in the war at sea, many British and some Canadian observers concluded as late as the spring of 1943 that the professional skill of RCN officers and ratings lagged the standards of the Royal and US Navies. The quality of radars, weapons, and general maintenance of Canadian vessels also fell short of British and American expectations.

Under these circumstances it may seem surprising that, at the Atlantic Convoy Conference held in Washington in March 1943, British and American naval leaders agreed to Ottawa's proposal to establish an exclusively Canadian-controlled zone known as the Canadian Northwest Atlantic Command. At the same time, the United States withdrew almost entirely from the escort of trans-Atlantic mercantile convoys, leaving that task primarily in British and Canadian hands. The authors do not hesitate to refer to Anglo-American reservations about this decision. They note that Allied affirmation of Canada's naval maturity was accompanied by renewed British efforts in the spring of 1943 to provide more intensive training for the Dominion's ASW (anti-submarine) ships.

An intriguing special subject covered in this history is the role of Ultra intelligence. All too often students of the Battle of the Atlantic tend to think that this celebrated story involved the simple ability by the cryptographers at Bletchley Park to read or not to read German encrypted messages. In contrast, Douglas and his associates present a richly nuanced account of Bletchley Park's evolving capabilities. They show, for example, that in addition to periods when the codebreakers were able to read German traffic almost immediately, there were times when decrypts were produced too late to be of tactical use. On occasion, British and Allied codebreakers could read the body of German messages, but failed to comprehend the grid-square system used by the Germans to designate the actual or intended locations of their submarines.

As important as Ultra was to the Allies, *No Higher Purpose* demonstrates that cryptography was far from being the only valuable intelligence source in the Battle of the Atlantic. Shore-based high frequency direction finding stations operated by Canada and her allies, later joined by mobile units on board some convoy escorts, could be equally useful in localizing enemy submarines. Traffic analysis of radio transmissions, as well as the acute individual eyesight of ship look-outs, should not be forgotten in assessing Allied successes in the ASW war.

The key American figure in this account is Admiral Ernest J. King. As the Atlantic Fleet commander in 1941, and later as overall commander of the US Navy, King exercised American strategic control over all Allied naval forces operating in the western Atlantic, while the Royal Navy had similar responsibilities in the eastern part of that ocean. Alec Douglas and his colleagues clearly delineate King's belief that mixed national formations were inefficient and hence undesirable. The authors also describe the Admiral as a "pronounced anglophobe." In this reviewer's opinion that characterization is not supported by the evidence presented in this book. To be sure, King often was direct and blunt in dealing with Royal naval officials and he sometimes was suspicious of the intentions of his British counterparts. But the authors show that, despite King's acerbic reputation, he could negotiate cooperative agreements on a reasonably cordial basis that were mutually acceptable to both the Royal and the US Navies, as well as to Canadian leaders.

Over many years, British and Canadian historians, including the authors of *No Higher Purpose*, have taken some satisfaction in denouncing Admiral King for delaying by several months, early in 1942, the organization of American coastal convoys to deal with the enemy's U-boat offensive in the Western Atlantic. Despite the heavy shipping losses suffered off the American coast, the admiral contended that he needed to wait for the availability of

sufficient escort vessels to provide effective convoy protection. The authors of *No Higher Purpose* appear to be perfectly correct in asserting that even a weakly defended convoy or, in fact, ships in a convoy without any escorts at all, were statistically safer from submarine attacks than merchant vessels sailing independently. They cite works by Robert W. Love and others (but not, it appears, Clay Blair's *Hitler's U-Boat War*, a more recent revisionist account) that defend King's decision in light of the other urgent requirements facing the US Navy in 1942. Despite the persuasive arguments put forth by Alec Douglas and his colleagues it seems unlikely that we have heard the last of this dispute.

It is possible, of course, to suggest shortcomings in any ambitious work. One problem with *No Higher Purpose*, in my opinion, is the omission of a bibliographic section, including a discussion of the major primary sources consulted. The volume's multitudinous footnotes suggest the wide-ranging research undertaken for this project. But scholars interested in pursuing further work on the Battle of the Atlantic will regret the absence of the rich bibliographic insights that the authors of this book are especially qualified to provide.

Another useful addition that perhaps could be included in the next volume of this history would be a discussion of the demographics and outlooks of RCN personnel. *No Higher Purpose* argues that by 1943 the RCN became a key Canadian national institution. The full meaning of that development could be explicated by presenting information on the participation in the RCN of French Canadians, of individuals from the western provinces, and of other groups. It would be particularly useful to discuss the extent to which the sectional viewpoints of these personnel may have been replaced by more nationalistic attitudes.

Despite these cavils, it is clear that *No Higher Purpose* is an immensely important addition to our knowledge of World War II and to the modern history of Canada. The authors, the Canadian Directorate of History and Heritage, and the other institutions that supported this project over a number of years deserve the highest praise for the publication of a landmark contribution.

Dean C. Allard
Arlington, Virginia, USA

In 1949 the Royal Canadian Navy's operational research scientists proposed to the naval staff that a thorough and comprehensive operational history of the recent war be undertaken - primarily to highlight the major problems which confronted the RCN during those trying days - so that necessary lessons could be learned. The senior officers of the navy were not convinced. They all knew of the serious problems of efficiency, especially early in the war: they did not need a proper history to tell them that. In a hand written minute, the VCNS, Frank Houghton, confided to the scientists that some of the issues they wanted to research "are naturally slightly unpalatable - perhaps because we realize their basic truth!" In any event, the popular one-volume account by Joseph Schull, *The Far Distant Ships*, would appear "any day now." In his formal minute Houghton observed, "A complete history of the R.C.N., on the lines suggested is unlikely to be written unless someone does it off his own bat." The rest, as they say, is history.

For half a century, the remarkable exploits of Canada's navy in the Second World War remained the purview of private scholars - and the subject of criticism, innuendo and neglect. Solid American and British official histories contrasted sharply with Schull's light and colourful *tour d'horizon*. And while British, American and German memoirs focussed on how the war at sea was fought, Canadian memoirs - few and far between for most of the

period - were all about growing up under the stress of war. Only Alan Easton's *50 North* rated as a classic, and even it was seldom used by foreign scholars. In the end, the accepted view of the RCN's role in the war was established by the British. Captain Donald Macintyre, RN, the RCN's most trenchant critic, described the Canadians in his 1956 memoir, *The U-Boat Killer*, as almost criminally incompetent, while in W. S. Chalmers' biography of Admiral Sir Max Horton, Canadians were cowboys out stirring up trouble while the herd was left unprotected. Big but bungling was the standard take on the RCN by the late 1970s.

On the up side, private scholars - like this reviewer - were able to make a career filling the gap left by RCN myopia. Starting in 1980, with Jim Boutilier's milestone conference "The RCN in Retrospect", a devoted cadre of naval historians spent two decades mapping out the parameters of the navy's Second World War story. As a result, apart from the impact of the Ultra revelation on the Battle of the Atlantic (which has drawn the attention of foreign scholars), much that is new and noteworthy in the Atlantic literature emerged from this country in the last twenty years. In that sense, the publication of *No Higher Purpose*, part one of the first volume of the new operational history of the RCN, is not only long overdue, it marks the culmination of a process and a watershed in the historiography of both the Canadian Navy and the naval war it describes.

No Higher Purpose is actually Volume II, Part I of the new official history of the RCN. Volume I, which has not yet appeared, returns to the ground already covered by Gilbert Tucker's first volume of *The Naval Service of Canada*, telling the story from origins to 1939. The present book is the first of two on the operational history of the war years: the book which Tucker and the operational scientists never got to write. *No Higher Purpose* takes the story from the immediate pre-war period to the spring of 1943 and the establishment of the Canadian Northwest Atlantic Command. The book is organized into two sections. The first, "Evolving a Role," takes the story up to the end of 1941 and the establishment of the Newfoundland Escort Force as the primary RCN commitment in the North Atlantic battle for the convoys. The second, "Crisis and Response," covers the 1942 and early 1943 period, both inshore and in the mid-ocean, as well as a chapter on the war in the Pacific. The writing is clear and cogent. As is the tradition with Canadian official histories, decisions and errors in judgement by senior staff are largely a collective responsibility - no one's ox gets gored here. Moreover, it is a public record: comprehensive, authoritative, and exhaustively researched from all sides of the battle - and the intelligence side as well. *No Higher Purpose* would, I suspect, have satisfied the navy's OR scientists fifty years ago.

The great merits of this lengthy official account are many, but three struck this reviewer as particularly important: it confirms that the general thrust of the private scholarship of the 1980s-90s was on the right track; it provides a welter of new insights and details in areas already well documented; and it provides solid accounts in several less well developed areas. Among the latter is the story of the early years of naval expansion, 1939-1941. Indeed, while much has been written about actual operations during this period, *No Higher Purpose* contains the first thorough and scholarly analysis of the whole - the development of policy and the often difficult relationships between the RCN and its larger counterparts. The theme here, echoing Adm Percy Nelles' observation to one British officer after the fall of France and the advent of rapid expansion, is very much "making bricks without straw." It has echoes of an apology, perhaps, for the problems which follow, but much of what was decided in Canada was based on practical and often contradictory information pried out of preoccupied staff officers in London and Washington. Of particular interest here is the role of the USN, at the highest level, in helping the RCN assert its independence from the British during 1941. This speaks to one of the real strengths of the book, its extensive research in American archives: no group of historians - even Americans -

has mined the USN's wartime records in Washington as completely as have Canada's official historians. This shows in the chapter on "Paukenslag," the attack along the eastern seaboard of North America in early 1942. The work done by the official historians on this subject warrants a book in itself: what we get is only a glimmer of the extensive research and writing of narratives done by the research team. But it does reveal that the RCN managed the inshore campaign effectively - even the apparent fiasco in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This will not be a popular conclusion, although it is one long held by scholars working the field: in tone, content and argumentation *No Higher Purpose* confirms that judgement. The one chapter in this volume which is almost entirely new in content and interpretation is, of course, that on the Pacific war: until now a scarcely touched aspect of RCN history. Basic operations off the coast are explained, as is the system for co-ordination of effort with the Americans. Non-military/naval historians can learn much of Canada's wartime experience from the description of the confiscation of Japanese fishing boats, and the full details of the shelling of Estevan Point lighthouse which are laid out for the first time.

The operational story itself is a familiar one: the RCN's real baptism of fire was the battle for convoy SC 42 in September 1941; the Germans did not have it all their own way in the attacks on convoys in the St. Lawrence (although no U-boats were sunk); escort groups in the mid-ocean got into trouble in late 1942 (ON 127, SC 107, ONS 154) and were transferred to the Eastern Atlantic, where they and the TORCH corvettes did very well, and so on. It all culminates in the establishment of the Canadian Northwest Atlantic in April 1943. Here new information is perhaps more incremental - and confirming - rather than profound. "New" U-Boat kills accredited to the RCN in recent years are described in full, but they do not change the substance of the debate: we have long known that the navy did better than many detractors concede. Moreover, much of the new information here — like fact that metric wavelength radar by Canadian mid-ocean groups in the fall of 1942 allowed Germans to find them easier, the story of Canadian oil convoys of 1942, the success of escorts operating in the Mediterranean - has appeared in journal articles over the years.

Having said all this, it may seem churlish to complain about the book in any way, but a few points warrant mention. At 630 pages, *No Higher Purpose* is almost certain to put off casual readers and foreign historians alike. Moreover, there are occasions (such as the prolonged debate over the establishment of the Newfoundland Escort Force) when detail might well have been excised for the sake of pace. Perhaps more importantly, this reviewer's copy suffered from misplaced maps which left him leafing through the text trying to locate the right one.

In the end, *No Higher Purpose* is a monumental work: a fitting "account of record" and the culmination of a long process. It was a struggle to have the Department of National Defence fund the project itself, but the years of research and writing by the naval history team also fuelled debate, funded research, tested the work of many private scholars, and provided encouragement and resources to those working in the field. *No Higher Purpose*, therefore, is more than just another operational history. It reflects the maturation of a decades-long debate engendered in many ways by the decision taken nearly sixty years ago not to bother with a proper history. It integrates the extensive Canadian literature and that produced by scholars abroad into a single survey, making it the best account available for both the RCN and the Atlantic war itself. Where the history of the RCN in the 1939-1943 period goes from here is anyone's guess, but at least we now have a clear starting point for future debate.

Marc Milner
St. John, New Brunswick