

INSTRUMENTS OF SECURITY: THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY'S PROCUREMENT OF THE TRIBAL-CLASS DESTROYERS, 1938-19431

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According to navy scuttlebutt, when in 1938 Canada's Chief of Naval Staff saw a photograph of Britain's newly-commissioned Tribal-class destroyers, he declared "I want those for my navy." This would have been bold talk indeed. Since its inception in 1910, the Royal Canadian Navy had been a small, almost inconsequential force that received little political or popular support and had narrowly escaped an attempt to have it virtually disbanded. An almost desperate determination to avoid such threats in the future drove the RCN's leaders to go to extreme lengths to acquire Tribals, ships they thought would be too valuable for the government to scrap, and to ensure they were deployed in a manner that would bring credit to the navy.

The British had designed the Tribals in response to a new generation of extremely powerful "super" destroyers being built by other naval powers? Royal Navy designs after World War I were guided by staff requirements calling for "small handy ships with a good torpedo armament." The results were the "A" to "I"-class destroyers commissioned between 1927 and 1938. The four "C" or Crescent-class destroyers acquired by the RCN in the late 1930s were typical. Displacing 1375 tons with a length of 329 feet and a design speed of thirty-six knots, the Crescents were armed with four 4.7-inch guns and eight twenty-one inch torpedo tubes. These "classical British destroyers" did not match the latest foreign designs.

During the 1920s and early 1930s the Japanese, French, Italian and United States navies had started to build larger destroyers with more powerful armaments. The twenty-four Japanese Fubuki-class ships posed the greatest potential threat to the British. Displacing 1750 tons and armed with six five-inch guns and nine twenty-one inch torpedo tubes (it was not until the war that it was learned that the torpedoes were the deadly twenty-four inch "Long Lance"), the Fubukis were formidable opponents.' Equally disturbing, in 1933 the Admiralty learned that the Germans were designing similar vessels. Faced with the prospect of meeting superior destroyers in two of the most important theatres of operations, British planners realized that "with seventy-two destroyers built or building whose principal armament was the torpedo there was a need for more heavily armed ships." The result was the Tribal, a beautiful warship that influenced British design for years. On a displacement of 1850 tons, it carried eight 4.7-inch

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guns in newly-developed twin mounts and four twenty-one inch torpedo tubes. The ship was a virtual "pocket-cruiser;" it was this quality that made it so attractive to the Royal Canadian Navy.

The RCN had a difficult history from its founding in 1910. Buffeted by political controversy, the service had only a skeleton organization in 1914, but nevertheless succeeded in amassing a substantial fleet of small anti-submarine craft to meet the entirely unexpected German U-boat threat to Canada's shores during the First World War. After a promising reorganization after the armistice, the service was again slashed by cost-cutting governments in 1921-22. Just as somewhat increased funding began to bring limited growth in the early 1930s, severe government economies during the Great Depression led to a near-successful attempt by the army to have the fleet paid off on the ground that the limited money could be much better spent on maritime patrol aircraft. The situation began to improve in the mid-1930s. Increased international tensions presented an opportunity for growth, and naval leaders who had known only cutbacks were determined to take advantage of the situation by building a force strong enough to withstand any future political or budgetary threats. The Tribals became the key to this goal.

The RCN's campaign to acquire Tribals was led by Rear Admiral P.W. Nelles, who had become Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) in 1934. Far from cutting the figure of a dashing naval officer, the diminutive, bespectacled Nelles has been described as resembling "the senior clerk of an old family law firm." Appearances aside, he was a capable administrator who knew what type of navy he wanted and, more important, was realistic about what he could get. With the increased estimates of 1936-38, he augmented the RCN's two modern River-class destroyers (variants of the British "A"-class) by purchasing four Crescent-classes from the RN. Yet Nelles considered these important new ships only stepping stones. In a letter to an associate he expressed disappointment that the Crescents (re-designated Rivers by the RCN) were only slight improvements upon the original River-class destroyers but concluded that they were "a very good stop gap until we can work our blessed country up to the price of and/or building in Canada.°

In January 1939, six months after the first Tribals had been commissioned in the RN, Nelles sought to convince the government that they were ideal for Canada's needs. In any future conflict, he explained, either or both Great Britain and the United States would almost certainly be allies and their capital ships could be counted upon to neutralize the main enemy forces. The RCN's primary responsibility was coastal defence and the main threat was likely to be surface raiders, such as pocket battleships, cruisers and armed merchant cruisers (like most other naval officers, Nelles thought his navy had the measure of submarines).¹ Although the RCN's modest destroyer force could theoretically provide adequate defence against raiders, Nelles thought more powerful warships were required. Cruisers were obviously the best counter but the CNS realized that their cost and personnel requirements placed them beyond Canada's means. Tribals presented the perfect alternative. Their powerful gun and moderate torpedo armaments would give them a fighting chance against cruisers while their anti-aircraft and anti-submarine outfit would enable them to counter threats from above or below. They also had the endurance to steam from Esquimalt or Halifax to British bases in the West Indies, something the Rivers could not do. Nelles concluded that a flotilla of six Tribals on each coast would provide "reasonable Naval defence."

The RCN's bid for Tribals dovetailed with the defence policies of the Mackenzie King government. After years of retrenchment, defence spending began to rise in the mid-1930s, yet because of the prime minister's apprehension of the political consequences of military commitments outside spheres of immediate Canadian interest, the increases were devoted primarily to home defence! This harmonized nicely with the RCN's coastal defence role and it was the reason the service was able to acquire the four Crescent-class destroyers from Britain. By 1939, the government's commitment to defence deepened even further. When debating the 1939-40 defence estimates in the House of Commons on 16 May 1939, the Minister of National Defence, L.A. Mackenzie, noted that the "ultimate objective that the navy has set for Canada is to build up a force of eighteen destroyers:" the six the RCN already had plus the twelve Tribals proposed by Nelles.' Although approval for acquisition of the new destroyers was not granted at the time, the fact that the minister raised the subject in parliament indicated that the navy's plans were compatible with government policy.

The outbreak of war gave the RCN its opportunity. On 18 September cabinet approved the navy's initial wartime expansion programme, including the acquisition of two Tribals. Initial hopes for building the ships in Canada gave way to the realization that there would be prohibitive delays in constructing so complex a vessel; the largest modern warship yet tackled by Canadian firms had been minesweepers. Nelles therefore asked the Admiralty if two Tribals could be ordered in Britain.' When this was refused because shipyards in the UK were already heavily burdened with their own emergency programmes, the RCN proposed a barter arrangement by which Canadian-built whalecatcher-type patrol boats--corvettes--could be exchanged for British-built Tribals. The ensuing negotiations provide evidence of the RCN's steadfast determination to acquire Tribals.

In November the Admiralty agreed to the barter arrangement but recommended the substitution of Intermediate destroyers! The ships proposed were "O" and "P"-class ordered in the first two months of the war. Designed with an eye to low cost and quick construction, they were essentially "A" to "I"-class destroyers in modern hulls.¹⁶ Not wanting destroyers little better than the "stop gaps" the RCN already possessed, Nelles concluded that Intermediates were unsuitable as "Canada's principal naval ship." They lacked the firepower for "single-handed combat with Armed Merchant Cruisers" (the "O"s and "P"s mounted only four 4.7-inch guns) and long endurance!

There were other reasons that the RCN remained committed to Tribals. The navy had been cut to the bone after the First World War and Nelles was determined to prevent a recurrence by acquiring warships too valuable to scrap. Evidence of this strategy is provided by British officers who had conversations with the CNS early in the war. In September 1939, Captain E.S. Brand, an RN officer serving as the RCN's Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), reported to his superior in London that Nelles thought the Tribals would be "the best form of permanent men of war for Canada in the long run." More telling is an account by a prominent British officer, Admiral Sir Frederick Dreyer, who visited Naval Service Headquarters (NSHQ) in the midst of the barter negotiations. Retired but serving as a convoy Commodore, Dreyer was concerned with the lack of anti-submarine vessels on Canada's east coast and hoped to convince Nelles to concentrate on "obtaining cheap, mass production anti-submarine, patrol boat types of craft during this war." According to Dreyer, Nelles responded that he was working to achieve two objectives:

Object I. To win the war.

Object II. Before the finish of the war to have a number of Tribal destroyers in the Royal Canadian Navy, fully manned by Canadians. These he feels could not be wiped off the slate by whatever Canadian Government is then in power, as might be the case if only worn out Canadian Destroyers existed.²⁰

Dreyer attempted to dissuade Nelles by suggesting that he ask the Admiralty to provide Canada with six modern destroyers at the end of the war, thereby allowing the RCN to focus its immediate effort on the acquisition of anti-submarine vessels.' The CNS, doubtlessly recalling what had happened twenty years earlier, would have none of it.

After further failed attempts by the RN to have the RCN accept Intermediates the two sides finally reached agreement in March 1940. The Admiralty agreed to lay down two RCN Tribals as part of its 1940 New Construction programme and two more the following year.²²

Historians have criticized the choice of Tribals on two levels. Some insist that instead of acquiring a few powerful destroyers, the navy should have aimed for a larger number of small ships better suited for convoy escort duty. John Terraine, for example, accuses the navy of a "surface ship fixation" that led to a "misinterpretation of what its role would be."²³ One only has to look at where the war at sea stood in March 1940, when the final step in the initial Tribal acquisition process took place, to realize that such criticism is invalid. During the first six months of war, the German U-boat campaign was concentrated in British coastal waters. It was not until the fall of France and the capture of the Biscay ports that a sustained mid-ocean campaign became feasible.²⁴ The RCN's responsibility during this time remained Canadian coastal defence and surface raiders were still considered the most dangerous threat. Furthermore, the need for escorts had not been ignored: by March 1940, the RCN had obtained government approval for fifty-four corvettes and twenty-eight Bangor-class fleet minesweepers, primarily for anti-submarine and escort duties'

The second level of criticism concerns whether or not the Tribals were good ships. The design has been attacked on the grounds that its anti-aircraft armament was weak, its hull liable to structural damage in heavy seas and its endurance too short.²⁶ All were indeed problems but they had not been recognized by the time the RCN placed its orders. The lack of adequate anti-aircraft armament, common to all RN destroyers of pre-war design, became apparent only during the Norwegian and Mediterranean campaigns. The weakness was subsequently rectified in the RCN Tribals by replacing the low-angle twin 4.7 mounting in "X" position by a high-angle twin four-inch mounting, and by switching the searchlight and pom-pom positions to give the latter an improved field of fire. The hull problem first arose in mid-1940 and was corrected by extra stiffening. These and other modifications caused the British to refer to the Canadian ships as Improved Tribals. Poor endurance, a problem peculiar to the RCN Tribals, was never solved but the difficulty arose at least in part from the addition of radar and other new equipment later in the war that substantially increased top-weight. All things considered, in 1940 there was no other destroyer of British design that could have fulfilled the RCN's requirements as well.

A year after the British agreed to construct Tribals for the RCN, the navy was the recipient of unexpected further largesse from the King government. The prime minister considered the production of munitions and military equipment one of the most important contributions Canada could make to the war effort, in no small part because industrial expansion would benefit the country in the long run. A feature of the rapid industrial

mobilization that resulted was that the vast majority of contracts, including those for shipbuilding, went to firms in central Canada. For example, only thirteen of the sixty-four corvettes (fifty-four for the RCN, ten for the RN) ordered by early 1941 were tendered to firms outside Ontario and Quebec, and only three of those thirteen went to the Maritimes. East coast shipyards were left mainly with repair work, with the result that many skilled workers were lured to jobs in central Canada. Instead of benefitting from industrial mobilization, the Maritimes apparently fell behind the rest of the country.²⁷

Nova Scotia found a saviour when Mackenzie King appointed Angus L. Macdonald, the province's former premier, Minister of National Defence for Naval Services in July 1940. According to historian Ernest R. Forbes, Macdonald realized "he could not hope to affect the decisions taken for the location of naval manufacture for which production lines had already been established. He could, however, propose classes of vessels not yet under construction."²⁸ Admiral Nelles, who had already renewed his campaign for the building of Tribals in Canada, was quick to recommend them to the minister. On 1 October 1940 Macdonald took the proposal to the Cabinet War Committee where the prime minister and his senior ministers effectively ran the Canadian war effort. Citing the problems delaying construction of the RCN Tribals in Britain, Macdonald proposed that future destroyers be built at home. This sparked an investigation into the practicability of building complex warships in Canadian yards during which the navy again demonstrated its fierce commitment to Tribals.²⁹

Both the government and navy recognized that the project could only be undertaken with the assistance of British technical personnel. Hard-pressed themselves, the British were less than willing to let such people go.' Alternatively, they suggested that the Canadians consider building an American design. Forced to consider new sources of supply, the navy convened a delegation of officers and civilian naval architects to inspect US destroyers under construction at two east coast shipyards. Although the British reversed themselves and agreed to provide technical assistance before the committee departed, the inspection went ahead.

The Canadians were unimpressed with the Benson-class destroyers they inspected. Although they considered the American ships well-constructed and fitted-out, they thought them top-heavy and had concerns about their seaworthiness, suspicions confirmed by some of the USN officers with whom they talked. However, the Canadians were also shown plans (one delegate says they were the first individuals "outside US government staff" permitted to view them) of the new Fletcher-class." These clearly impressed. In fact, those members of the delegation who commented on the new design saw little to choose between it and Tribals.' Yet, no matter how attractive the Fletchers, the navy was not going to build them: the RCN's Engineer-in-Chief, Rear Admiral G.L. Stephens, best summed up why:

- (a) British destroyers are of better design.
- (b) As it would be required to generally operate in close association with British Destroyers similar design simplifies repairs, replacement of parts and stores.
- (c) RCN personnel better acquainted with the construction and operation of British design.'

Although the first recommendation was questionable in light of the delegation's comments about the Fletcher design, the second and third were valid. A far more important factor was that the RCN was not ready to sever its traditional close ties to the RN.

That did not mean that Canadians were prepared to follow RN advice blindly. After failing to convince the Canadians to build an American design, British officers attempted to persuade them to consider vessels less complex than Tribals. After conversations with members of the British Admiralty Technical Delegation (BATM) in Ottawa, the RCN's Director of Shipbuilding, Commander (E) A.C.M. Davy, recommended that Intermediate destroyers be built:

I understand that the Intermediate type ships are smaller, can be built more rapidly and more cheaply, if the Admiralty have decided as a result of war experience that the Intermediate type vessel is a more satisfactory product, then I feel we should be most ill-advised in proceeding with the construction of Tribal class destroyers.³⁴

This was poor advice. It was not just a matter of selecting a design that would be easier to build but of choosing the ship most suitable for the RCN's needs. The Naval Staff had already rejected the "O"s and "P"s, but because those ships had yet to be commissioned and therefore had no "war experience," they may not have been the type recommended. Commander Davy and the BATM could have been promoting the Hunt-class, but the lightly-armed, short-legged, slow Hunts were even more unsuited for Canadian needs. The Naval Staff rejected Davy's recommendation at its 27 April meeting; as far as it was concerned the original reasons for selecting Tribals still applied.

There was also some disagreement within the Cabinet War Committee as to what type of ship to build. At a meeting on 21 April the prime minister had argued for the construction of merchant ships instead of destroyers.³⁵ Macdonald could not attend that meeting but when informed of the discussion by C.D. Howe he replied that "it would be a mistake to concentrate the whole shipbuilding efforts of this country on merchant ships." With the "great dangers" from U-boats in the north Atlantic and surface raiders operating within "three or four hundred miles off the Newfoundland coast," there was a requirement for more destroyers, "all in all, the best type of escort for the purpose."³⁶ Macdonald's views carried at the next meeting of the Cabinet War Committee in which it was decided to lay down two Tribals in Canadian shipyards!³⁷ In early 1942 the committee authorized two more. Despite advice that the ships should be built in Montreal, the contracts were awarded to Halifax Shipyards Ltd. Nova Scotia had received its plum.

The decision to build Tribals in Canada was controversial at the time and remains so today. Some officers, particularly engineers, argued that the midst of war was not the time to embark upon such a challenging project and that the programme would absorb facilities and manpower that could be better used to maintain and modernize warships already in commission.³⁸ Subsequent developments justified these worries and historians have documented the negative impact the project had on the RCN's war effort.³⁹ But senior officers had not been blind to these potential difficulties. The calculated risk they took can only be properly assessed in terms of the circumstances in 1940-41 when they made their decision.

At that time there was every reason to doubt Britain's capacity to meet Canadian needs. British shipyards were producing fewer than two fleet destroyers a month and with losses mounting (fourteen RN fleet destroyers were sunk between October 1940 and May 1941) there was no guarantee that they could fill Canadian orders. Bombing was also taking its toll. British shipyards were an important *Luftwaffe* target; in fact, the first RCN Tribal laid down at Vickers-Armstrong in Newcastle was damaged in an air raid. Furthermore, Hitler had not yet attacked the Soviet Union and the threat of an invasion of England was still very real. In the north Atlantic U-boats were exacting an ever-mounting toll on shipping and the German surface fleet was at its strongest since the outbreak of the war. Given this situation (and there were no indications it was going to improve), it would have been wrong not to endeavour to develop alternate sources of supply.

The Tribal building programme also provided a strong foundation for Admiral Nelles' efforts to secure the RCN's future. In a 1944 memo the Director of Plans, Captain G.R. Miles, noted that an "active healthy shipbuilding industry is a prerequisite for any country which is to hold its place upon the sea."⁴⁰ What better way to ensure the survival of a navy than to have a naval shipbuilding industry constructing the very warships selected as the principal pillars of the post-war fleet? The political and financial commitments to such a programme would simply be too considerable to be dismantled. As Marc Milner, one of the strongest critics of the decision concludes, "since the government was determined to build something, the navy was happy to support the building of Tribals."⁴¹

The RCN's leaders were determined that the Tribals should be utilized in a way that befit their status as Canada's premier warships. The achievement of this ambition was complicated by the fact that the war at sea, and Canada's role, had changed considerably between the time the first Tribals were ordered in early 1940 and the commissioning of the lead ship, HMCS *Iroquois*, in late 1942. The submarine had superseded the surface raider as the most dangerous threat and the RCN's primary role had become mid-ocean convoy escort on the north Atlantic. The switch to large-scale alliance commitments placed the navy in a difficult position as it was desperately short of modern escort vessels, especially destroyers. Although Tribals could be used for escort duty and the Battle of the Atlantic was at a crisis, naval leaders pushed for the deployment of Tribals overseas where they believed the ships could best help achieve the long-term goals of the service.

It was in European waters that the destroyers stood the best chance of participating in dramatic, high-profile surface actions that would bolster the navy's prestige. During the 1914-1918 conflict, Canada's tiny "tin-pot navy" had been confined to domestic waters in which the chances of action were slim. Indeed, in the only encounter between a Canadian warship and the enemy, the a/s trawler HMCS *Hochelaga* turned tail when it caught *U-156* on the surface south of Newfoundland.⁴² The RCN's First World War experience, according to a recent study, left it "with little lore to fuel tradition," and naval leaders were determined to correct this in World War II. But that was not enough. Canadian sailors had brought great credit to the service during the first years of the war mainly through convoy defence, but that was not the image naval leaders wished to cultivate.⁴⁴ They desired a more traditional fighting heritage, and the best way to achieve that was to have some warships deployed in offensive operations.

Deployment of the Tribals overseas had to be approved by the Cabinet War Committee, but when the naval minister introduced the subject at the 16 September 1942 meeting he ran into difficulties. Macdonald explained that the Tribals "would be of most service

in European waters with the British fleet...convoy duty could be as well performed by other craft." This did not sit well with the prime minister. Riding a favourite hobby-horse, King reminded Macdonald that the RCN's "primary responsibility" was the defence of Canada. He expressed "serious concern at the diversion of naval units from Canadian coasts in view of seriously increased sinkings in the Atlantic." He also warned that "it was no means impossible that the Japanese would make some attempt on the Pacific coast." Macdonald downplayed the likelihood of any attack on the west coast but the committee nevertheless deferred the decision.⁴⁶ Later that day the prime minister's resolve stiffened when he learned that U-boats had sunk two ships in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.' The navy had a fight on its hands. If Mackenzie King had his way the Tribals would spend the war, like the trawlers of the previous conflict, on uneventful patrols in Canadian waters. In the end the navy won the day by linking the deployment of the Tribals with the escort shortage.

Allied navies were plagued by a shortage of destroyers for much of the war, but in the autumn of 1942 the RCN's need was especially acute. The loss in September of HMCS *Ottawa* (one of the Crescents that had been purchased from Britain in 1936-38) left the navy with only five modern destroyers. In light of the increasing intensity of the U-boat offensive, staff officers determined that a minimum of fourteen destroyer escorts were required to fulfil the RCN's north Atlantic trade defence commitments and on 5 October the Naval Board recommended that they be obtained from the Admiralty "by whatever reciprocal agreement may be possible."⁴⁸

A week later the Naval Board agreed that although convoy escort work would remain the "main effort" of the navy, the "8 Tribal class [destroyers] will constitute the main contribution to the offensive." As such they would have to operate with British naval forces in the European theatre. By exchanging overseas deployment of the Tribals for destroyer escorts, the RCN would obtain the required escorts while also achieving an offensive role for the Tribals.

Macdonald took this proposal to the Cabinet War Committee on 28 October but it merely noted the submission and moved on to other business.' That night the prime minister confided to his diary that Macdonald wanted to have the Tribals "form a squadron to serve in the Mediterranean and to accept some old destroyers from Britain which we, ourselves, will have to man. In other words the proposal is to make a still further demand on the manpower of the country." Increased manpower demands were anathema to Mackenzie King, and his silence in the war committee meeting was indicative of his unwillingness to cooperate with his naval leaders. But instead of trying to convince the prime minister, Macdonald and Nelles left him out of the process.

Although the war committee met twice in November, Macdonald did not raise the issue of Tribal deployment. Instead, he waited until early December when Mackenzie King was out of the country. At the 2 December meeting he received agreement in principal to approach the Admiralty for the escort destroyers needed to cover the RCN's shortfall and three days later the Naval Staff despatched a signal to that effect to the British. No mention was made of the Tribals. A week later, however, Admiral Nelles offered the Admiralty the same deal that Mackenzie King had twice refused to approve; an exchange of Tribals for escorts.' Some may argue that the CNS was trying to help the RN, also desperately short of destroyers, to free up escort destroyers by offering the Tribals in exchange. An important NSHQ document indicates that Nelles's motives were more selfish.

This paper came from the Director of Plans, Captain H.G. DeWolf, described by Milner "as one of the RCN's ablest staff officer."⁵³ DeWolf began by explaining that destroyers

had since 1939 evolved into two distinctly different types: fleet and escort. Fleet destroyers, he argued, were much more capable and flexible, able "to operate in the face of any form of attack." Escort destroyers (or "de-classed fleets" in the RN parlance), on the other hand, had become narrowly specialized to counter submarines in the north Atlantic, sacrificing much of their striking power and performance in order to carry stronger a/s armament and additional fuel. To confuse Tribals, the queens of the fleet, with escorts would be a grave mistake, DeWolf warned:

The Tribal is essentially a fighting destroyer. It is the largest and most heavily armed of all Fleet Destroyers. It is especially powerful in surface and anti-aircraft gunnery. There are few such ships to meet the heavy demands in the fighting theatres of war, and every unit must be employed to best advantage. It would be most uneconomical to use a Tribal in North Atlantic convoy escort when its guns are so urgently required elsewhere.

The only proper course, he concluded, would be to place the powerful destroyers under British operational control: "where the need is greatest can be best decided by the Admiralty and it is strongly recommended that the Canadian Tribals be placed at their disposal without restriction. Only in this way can they contribute to the general cause." Finally, in a salvo aimed directly at the prime minister, DeWolf dismissed any need for deployment on Canada's west coast:

Developments in the West and Southwest Pacific in 1942 have, if anything lessened the likelihood of a raid by Japanese surface vessels. An air raid by carrier-borne aircraft remains a possibility, but carriers are valuable ships to risk within the range of shore-based aircraft, and such a raid would be launched from 250 to 400 miles off the coast, where only aircraft could hope to intercept. Under present conditions, to tie up Tribals on our West Coast would be even more wasteful than employing them in North Atlantic escort work.³⁴

It is clear from Dewolf's strong language and forceful argument that the Naval Staff was not trying to do the RN any favours; it wanted its premier warships in the "fighting theatres of war."

The Dewolf memo was almost certainly prepared in case the prime minister protested the actions taken in his absence. Although addressed to Nelles, the simplicity of the language indicates it was intended for persons, like the politicians of the war cabinet, unknowledgable about warships and naval operations. In the event, the ammunition supplied by DeWolf was not needed.

On 28 December Macdonald sought permission from the Cabinet War Committee, with the prime minister in attendance, "to offer the Tribals for use with the British fleet in return for seriously needed smaller craft which could be more efficiently employed on escort work." He did not inform his colleagues that Nelles had already made that proposal to the

Admiralty on 9 December. After discussion the war committee approved the offer on the condition the RCN received the required escorts. Mackenzie King, perhaps succumbing to the advice of his naval leaders, said not a word.⁵⁵

As Admiral Nelles no doubt realized, the Admiralty had little choice but to accept the RCN's proposition. In January 1943 a Canadian officer, Captain W.B. Creery, delivered a more detailed version of the CNS's proposal of 9 December to the Admiralty. The RN was offered use of the four Tribals in exchange for four newly-converted destroyer escorts, but with the caveat that "failing acceptance of this proposal it is possible that the Tribals may have to be withdrawn and used as destroyer escorts.⁵⁶ The assistant to the Director of Plans at the Admiralty minuted that the offer was not "an attractive one" but it was obvious "that we must meet the Canadians halfway or we may lose their four Tribals to trade escort instead."⁵⁷ Another staff officer thought the RN should accept the proposal but man the Tribals itself. This balloon was shot down by the Director of the Operations Division (Home), Captain J.A.S. Eccles, who perceptively noted that "the Canadians are proud of these Tribals and will, it is thought, be against a transfer of these, their largest fighting ships to RN manning." The crucial issue was that the Tribals "however manned, should be attached to Home Fleet."⁵⁸

That is what happened. HMCS *Iroquois* commissioned in December 1942 and, after a brief show-the-flag voyage to Halifax, was assigned to the Home Fleet in March 1943. Her three sisters joined her by the end of summer. Meanwhile, the RCN began to receive its much-needed destroyer escorts the same month *Iroquois* began operations with the Home Fleet. No matter what one thinks of their tactics, Nelles and Macdonald had negotiated a "win-win" deal: the RCN's destroyer escort shortage was alleviated while the Tribals were deployed overseas where they would have the best opportunity for offensive action.

In the end the Tribals lived up to expectations. During the summer of 1943 *Iroquois* and *Athabaskan* screened anti-submarine forces during the Biscay offensive and in the autumn joined their two sisters on the Murmansk run. In early 1944 the four destroyers transferred to Plymouth where, operating in support of the invasion, they distinguished themselves in actions against German destroyers and other light forces in the English Channel and Bay of Biscay. Although one was lost, their success added greatly to the RCN's prestige. Moreover, the achievements of the four Tribals, *Iroquois*, *Athabaskan*, *Huron* and *Haida*--the latter Canada's most famous warship--made a valuable, lasting contribution to Canada's burgeoning naval tradition' After the war the three surviving British-built Tribals were joined by their four Canadian-built sisters and six of the ships performed good service in Korea. During the 1950s, the destroyers were modified to enable them to play a useful role in the new anti-submarine navy. They remained an integral part of the RCN as anti-aircraft and anti-submarine destroyers until the mid-1960s. On decommissioning, HMCS *Haida* became Canada's first memorial warship; she still lies alongside the Ontario Place complex on Toronto's waterfront.

Two observations arise from the Tribals' procurement and deployment during the Second World War. A navy with a substantial fleet and solid government support can acquire ships for specific roles: cruisers for anti-raider or commerce-raiding duties, sloops or frigates for trade protection, and so forth. A small navy with limited political support, such as the RCN at the close of the 1930s, cannot afford such a broad range of specialized vessels. Realistically, it must choose a vessel that is at once demonstrably economical and multi-purpose. Furthermore, because of the difficulty of garnering political support and funding for new

acquisition programmes, the ships selected must have the flexibility to meet fresh challenges over a period of many years.



Figure 1: This splendid shot of HMCS *Iroquois* departing St. John's in the early 1960s shows the final Tribal configuration. Twin 4-inch HA guns are now mounted in "A" and "B" positions with a 3-inch/50 in "X" and 40mm Bofors on either side of the deck house. A pair of Squid anti-submarine mortars are located on the quarterdeck. A new foremast, modern radar and funnel cowls have been added but the Jeep amidships was not standard equipment! This fine ship was paid off in 1962.

Source: Department of National Defence, NFD-7336.

The Tribals had the general purpose capability the RCN needed. As Nelles explained in January 1939, the big destroyers could perform all tasks expected of Canada's major warship; they had the striking power to combat surface raiders and the ability to counter submarines or aircraft. The Tribals were able to carry out these roles throughout the war and with modifications into the 1960s. It is doubtful whether Nelles was looking so far into the future or

had the vision to foresee the coming trends in naval warfare, but he chose a general purpose warship suitable for the type of navy he commanded.



Figure 2: HMCS *Athabaskan* at anchor in Plymouth Sound days before her loss on 29 April 1944. Twin 4.7-inch guns are in "A," "B" and "Y" positions with a twin 4-inch high angle mount in "X." Note the excellent field of fire provided the quad 2-pounder pom-pom on the deck house forward of "X" mount as opposed to the more restricted arc it would have in the searchlight position as on the RN Tribals. During repairs from heavy damage suffered from a glider bomb in August 1943, *Athabaskan* had received a lattice foremast with the strength to support an improved radar suite and increased A/A capability in the form of six twin powered 20mm Oerlikon mounts.

Source: Department of National Defence, R-1039.

The second observation concerns the influence of the RCN's past experience on the Tribals' acquisition and deployment. Admiral Nelles in 1939 was the leader of a navy that barely existed, with a tiny corps of senior officers who had spent much of their careers struggling against the decimation or extinction of their service. During the First World War, the RCN had been a small ship fleet capable of no more than an inglorious home defence role, and largely for those reasons the governments of the early 1920s had wielded the financial axe. Admiral Nelles was perhaps no visionary but he was mindful of history.

NOTES

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1. This paper was originally presented to an American Military Institute session at the Missouri Valley History Conference in Omaha, Nebraska in March 1991. Thanks to Dr. Malcolm Muir for that opportunity, and to Dr. Roger Sarty for sharing research and providing encouragement.
2. Captain T.C. Pullen RCN (Ret'd) to author, 19 January 1988.
3. For a study of the trend towards larger destroyers see Antony Preston (ed.), *Super Destroyers: The Big Destroyers Built in the 1930s for Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States* (London, 1978).
4. E.J. March, *British Destroyers, 1892-1953* (London, 1960), 323.
5. Peter Hodges, *Tribal Class Destroyers* (London, 1960), 6.
6. See A.J. Watts, "The Japanese Special Type, 1923" in Preston (ed.), *Super Destroyers*, 2-13; M.J. Whitley, *Destroyers of World War II: An International Encyclopedia* (Annapolis, 1988), 192-195.
7. March, *British Destroyers*, 323.
8. Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* (Toronto, 1985), 7.
9. Rear Admiral P.W. Nelles to Captain V.G. Brodeur, 22 March 1937. National Archives of Canada (NAC), MG 30 E212, Vol. 4, File 33.
10. See M. Whitby, "In Defence of Home Waters: Doctrine and Training in the Royal Canadian Navy During the 1930s," *Manner's Mirror*, LXXVII, No. 2 (May 1991), 167-177.
11. Admiral P.W. Nelles, "Objectives of the Canadian Naval Service," 17 January 1939, NAC, 1017-10-34, RG 24, Vol. 3844.
12. C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments* (Ottawa, 1970), 3-6.
13. *Ibid.*, 1-6, 307-308; Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, *Debates* (1939), IV, 4129; G.N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada* (Ottawa, 1950), I, 359-367.
14. Captain L.W. Murray, "History of Barter Arrangements with Admiralty," 4 March 1940, Directorate of History, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa (DHist), Construction—Ships, 1, 8200.
15. Admiralty to CNS, 6 November 1939, NAC, 1017-10-22, Vol. I, RG 24, Vol. 3841.
16. Admiralty to NSHQ, 15 November 1939, NAC, 1017-10-22 Vol. I, RG 24, Vol. 3841. DHist, Admiralty (ADM) 1/18456; March, *British Destroyers*, 377-386; Whitley, *Destroyers of World War II*, 124-125; A. Raven and J. Roberts, *War Built Destroyers: O to Z Classes* (London, 1976).
17. Nelles to Admiralty, 20 December 1939, NAC, 1017-10-22 Vol. I, RG 24, Vol. 3841; Naval Staff Minutes, 22 January 1940, DHist, 1000-100/3.
18. Captain E.S. Brand to Rear Admiral J.H. Godfrey RN, 25 September 1939, NAC, 1017-10-22, Vol. I, RG 24, Vol. 3841. From 1910 until 1942 RN officers filled the DNI post at NSHQ.
19. Admiral Sir Frederick Dreyer, Memorandum of 27 January 1940, DHist, ADM 1/10608.

20. Admiral Sir F. Dreyer to Secretary of the Admiralty, 31 January 1940, DHist, ADM 1/10608. See also W.A.B. Douglas, "Conflict and Innovation in the RCN, 1939-1945" in G. Jordan (ed.), *Naval Warfare in the 20th Century* (New York, 1977), 215.
21. See note 19.
22. Canadian High Commissioner, London, to NSHQ, 14 March 1940, NAC, 1017-10-22, Vol. I, RG 24, Vol. 3841.
23. John Terraine, *The U-boat Wars, 1916-1945* (London, 1989), 329-330. Tony German makes a similar argument in *The Sea is at Our Gates: The History of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto, 1990).
24. K Doenitz, *Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days* (Annapolis, 1990), 110-113; S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea* (London, 1954), I, 102-106, 129-134; Great Britain, Ministry of Defence, Naval Historical Section, *The U-Boat War in the Atlantic*, I (London 1950).
25. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada*, II, 37-38.
26. See, for example German, *The Sea is at Our Gates*, 146; P. Smith, *Fighting Flotilla* (London, 1976).
27. Ernest R. Forbes, "Consolidating Disparity. The Maritimes and the Industrialization of Canada during the Second World War," *Acadiensis*, XV, No. 2 (Spring 1986), 3-8.
28. *Ibid.*, 14.
29. Minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, 1 October 1940, NAC, RG 2, 7c, Vol. 1; Naval Staff Minutes, 1 July 1940, 9 July 1940 and 17 September 1940, DHist.
30. Winston Churchill to Mackenzie King, 18 December 1940, NAC, MG 27, III B11, Vol. 54.
31. S.D.T. German, "Report of Visit to US Naval Yard at Boston, Mass. and Bath Iron Works, Bath, Me.," 28 January 1941, NAC, NSS1017-10-21 Sub I, Vol. I, RG 24, Vol. 3843.
32. The delegation's reports lie in NAC, NSS1017-10-21 Sub I, Vol. I, RG 24, Vol. 3843.
33. Captain G.L. Stephens, "Question of Building British or American Destroyers in Canada," 14 February 1941, DHist, Destroyers Tribal Class (General) 8000.
- DHist , Destroyers Tribal Class (A-Z) 8000.
35. Minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, 21 April 1941, NAC.
36. C.D. Howe to A.L. Macdonald, 29 April 1941; Macdonald to Howe, 1 May 1941, Angus L. Macdonald Papers, DHist, 80/218, Folder 21.
37. Minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, 6 May 1941, NAC.
38. Commander (E) A.C.M. Davy to Captain G.L. Stephens, 24 June 1941, NAC, 25-1, RG 24, Vol. 5613; Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada*, II, 58-60.
39. Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, 20; German, *The Sea is at Our Gates*, 146. Although a comprehensive study has yet to be carried out on the subject, it is evident that the manpower, facility and equipment demands of the Tribal building programme to some extent handicapped the RCN's ability to make much needed repairs and alterations to its escort force.
40. Captain G.12, Miles RCN, "Royal Canadian Navy—Modernization," 14 August 1944, NAC, 1818 Vol. I, RG 24, Vol. 8186.
41. Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, 20.
42. M. Hadley and R. Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders, 1880-1918* (Montreal, 1991), 268-269; Sarty, "Hard Luck Flotilla: The RCN's Atlantic Coast Patrol, 1914-18," in W.A.B. Douglas (ed.), *RCN in Transition, 1910-1985* (Vancouver, 1988), 118-119.
43. Hadley and Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships*, 303.
44. Captain RI. Agnew to Secretary Naval Board, 13 May 1942, NS1017-10-23, RG 24, Vol. 3840.
45. The prime minister was likely referring to attacks that had taken place the previous week against the Canadian escort convoy ON-127 in the North Atlantic. Seven merchant ships and the destroyer HMCS *Ottawa* were sunk.
46. Minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, 16 September 1942, NAC.
47. Mackenzie King Diary, 16 September 1942, DHist, 83/530.
48. Naval Staff Minutes, 5 October 1942, DHist.

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49. Naval Board Minutes, 12 October 1942, DHist, 1000-100/2.
50. Minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, 28 October 1942, NAC.
51. Mackenzie King Diary, 28 October 1942, DHist.
52. Nelles to Pound, 9 December 1942, Mist, ADM 1/12564.
53. Milner, *North Atlantic Run*, photograph caption between 156-157.
54. Captain H.G. DeWolf, "Employment of Tribal Destroyers," 7 December 1942, NAC, NSS8375-355, RG 24, Vol. 6797.
55. Minutes of the Cabinet War Committee, 28 December 1942, NAC.
56. Captain W.B. Creery to VCNS (RN), "Employment of Canadian Tribal Class Destroyers," 8 January 1943, DHist, ADM 1/12564.
57. A/Director of Plans Minute, 10 January 1943, DHist, ADM 1/12564.
58. DOD(H) memo, 16 January 1943, DHist, ADM 1/12564.
59. Martin Brice, *The Tribals: Biography of a Destroyer Class* (London, 1971); German, *The Sea is at Our Gates*, 156-165; Joseph Schull, *The Far Distant Ships* (Ottawa, 1950), 249-258, 286-294; Michael Whitby, "'Foolin' Around the French Coast': RCN Tribal Class Destroyer Actions, April 1944," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, XIX, No. 3 (Winter 1989), 54-61; Whitby, "The 'Other' Navy at War. The RCN's Tribal Class Destroyers 1939-1944" (Unpublished MA Thesis, Carleton University, 1988).