

Review Essay

Civil-Military Relations and Canada's 'Citizen' Navy

Jan Drent

Richard Mayne. *Betrayed. Scandal, Politics, and Canadian Naval Leadership*. Vancouver, B.C.: UBC Press, www.ubcpres.ca, in association with the Canadian War Museum, www.ubcpres.ca, 2006. xii + 279 pp., illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. CDN \$ 29.95, paper; ISBN 978-0-7748-1296-2.

There were bound to be serious problems in achieving the massive expansion of Canada's wartime navy at breakneck speed and in the midst of chaotic conditions at home and abroad. Numbers tell the story: the tiny force of 2,700 regular and reserve officers and men at war's outbreak grew to 71,500 by January 1944, and to 87,000 a year later, plus 5,000 members of the Womens' Royal Canadian Naval Service. By 1944, some 85 per cent of the navy were hostilities-only members of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (VRs) who had joined to fight the war. Their predominance resulted in what's been aptly described as a "citizens' navy." Unlike the RN and USN, which were able to build on large cadres of regular personnel and seasoned reservists, the Canadian navy's spectacular growth was very largely achieved by hastily training civilians who had had little or no marine experience.

The exponential growth in manpower on the basis of such a small cadre and the consequent challenges in competing with a massive training burden were only two facets of the Royal Canadian Navy's expansion. A marine industrial base had to be improvised from a peacetime sector that had never been large and had shrunk severely in the Great Depression, all while warships were actually being built on emergency schedules, and somehow equipped with weapons, sensors and ammunition and, then, supported to meet gruelling operational schedules. The context for these extreme pressures was the unforgiving Atlantic campaign in which the RCN was involved right from the start of hostilities. The fact that the navy had to face the double challenge of fighting a war while trying to grow from a tiny professional cadre was underlined by a permanent force officer in a post-war interview (p. 6), when he contrasted the RCN's problems in trying to achieve competence with its largely green sailors with the experience of the Canadian Army, which was able to train and develop for some three years before facing prolonged combat.

Richard Mayne is a member of the naval historical team at National Defence Headquarters and a naval reserve officer. The focus of his engrossing study is the interplay between the naval staff and their political masters as they grappled with the many obstacles that had to be overcome to create a modern fighting force. Specifically, it is about the relationship between Vice-Admiral Percy W. Nelles, the chief of the naval

staff, and Angus L. Macdonald, minister of National Defence for Naval Services. The story of the RCN's difficulties in modernizing its burgeoning fleet of emergency-built escorts in 1942-3 when effective action against the rapidly expanding German submarine fleet required the very latest of newly developed weapons and electronic sensors, has been told before. Gilbert Norman Tucker's *The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History*, Vol. II: *Activities on Shore during the Second World War* (1952) discussed the equipment problems frankly, although very briefly and incompletely. In 1986 Marc Milner's *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* supplied much additional information, and broke the story about how the minister utterly lost confidence in his senior admiral. David Zimmerman, *The Great Naval Battle of Ottawa* (1989) focused on internal problems over research, development and manufacturing within the government as Canada attempted to develop its own technological solutions to the urgent challenges at sea. Other important accounts include W.A.B. Douglas, *Out of the Shadows: Canada in the Second World War* (1977), and the two-volume official operational history by W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty and Michael Whitby: *No Higher Purpose* (2003) and *A Blue Water Navy* (2007). What is new in Richard Mayne's book is the detailed account of the key role played by a network of talented but disgruntled Volunteer Reserve officers who achieved ship commands in 1942-3 and passed damning information about the shortcomings of the fleet directly into the minister's office. *Betrayed* is a detailed case study of how concerted actions by mid-level officers influenced decisions at the political level.

Numerically, the Volunteer Reserve soon dwarfed the pre-war regular cadre and a second category of reserves -- professional, civilian mariners given courses of naval training in peacetime -- who were intended to be the main reinforcement for mobilization but were far too few for the task when the fall of France in 1940 made Canada Britain's principal ally. Unlike the Canadian Army and Royal Canadian Air Force, where all officers were identified by the same insignia of rank, in the wartime navy regular force officers and their counterparts from the two reserve categories were instantly distinguishable from each other because their sleeve lace was different. Many reserve officers made the best of this obvious differentiation by taking pride in their distinctiveness, but this divisive practice was just one of several factors stimulating an individual VR officer to identify with his fellow reserves rather than with the corporate RCN. Some of the most articulate members of the disaffected networks had been lawyers; some had political connections and had moved in elite circles. Accustomed to deference in civilian life, some chafed at their new status as novices in the service. Facing the stress of operations, it was not surprising that VR officers were dismayed by critical and immediate problems such as sketchy training, too-frequent transfer of personnel among ships that degraded crew efficiency, and shortcomings in equipment fits compared with RN escorts. Faced with desperate problems and daunting challenges, their urge to vent their frustrations was natural. Although these disaffected officers were relatively young and without experience in running an organization, they were convinced that their numerical preponderance in the wartime navy meant that the naval board—the senior policy and decision-making forum in naval headquarters—should include VR representation. Finally, these wartime officers were new to the naval

service and lacked the sort of institutional loyalty inculcated through long service. Naval headquarters, in its struggle to cope with the unheralded wartime pressures, seemed to the sea going VR officers to be remote, uncaring and ineffective. Through a chain of circumstances, these networks of VR officers eventually gained the ear of the minister's executive assistant, an ambitious lawyer named John Connolly, a civilian unfamiliar with naval matters. The fact that the discontented VRs chose to pass their concerns directly to the minister's office rather than through the normal chain of command sheds light on the internal dynamics of the wartime "civilian navy".

Percy Nelles had been chief of the naval staff for six years when Angus Macdonald was recruited by Prime Minister MacKenzie King in July 1940 to fill the new position of minister of National Defence for Naval Services. Macdonald, a Harvard graduate and former professor of law at Dalhousie University, had served as a front-line infantry officer during the Great War and came to Ottawa after seven years as premier of Nova Scotia. Fresh to federal politics and the often cut-throat world of the national capital, he had the additional challenge of carving out a new portfolio. One biographer has described him as an able administrator and Macdonald, apparently, was responsible for initiating a formal system of consultation with senior officers in headquarters and pushed for organizational reform. Overall, however, Macdonald did not prove an inspired choice as naval minister. The priority placed by the prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, on political issues facing the Cabinet must have been a major distraction. Mayne cites how Macdonald complained to King in 1943—three years into his job—that, on average, he was spending six hours a day in various meetings related to Cabinet business, and how these commitments were taking him away from naval affairs. Meanwhile, Nelles and his naval headquarters staff were seriously overstretched and trying to function within a haphazardly expanded version of an organizational structure designed for the miniscule pre-war navy. The organization was unequal to its many tasks and was eventually replaced in two major internal overhauls. When John Connolly set out in mid-1942 to investigate allegations by a well-connected and politically hostile VR officer about shortcomings on the east coast, the first of several channels of communication with dissatisfied Volunteer Reserve officers was opened. Louis Audette, another lawyer and old friend and professional associate of Connolly's who was then commanding a corvette, became a key member of another informal VR network.

The minister apparently paid insufficient attention to modernization of the fleet and operational standards as well as other issues until he perceived that these problems could become a serious political liability. Nelles, arguably overwhelmed with other issues, appears not to have adequately briefed his minister. The story, as Mayne relates it, is ugly. Two ambitious senior officers undermined Nelles's authority. The vice chief of the naval staff, Rear-Admiral G.C. Jones—Connolly's neighbour in Halifax some years earlier—expressed misgivings about his chief to the executive assistant. Another senior member of the naval staff, Captain H.N. Lay, shared his criticisms of the navy's expansion with his uncle, none other than the prime minister. Eventually, Macdonald concluded that Nelles lacked "the power, the personality [or] the respect of his officers." (p. 211)

Other criticisms of naval headquarters' performance under Nelles's leadership meanwhile came from a highly credible source, Commodore G.W.G. "Shrimp" Simpson, Royal Navy. He was the operational commander at Londonderry, Northern Ireland, the large British base that was the eastern end of the north Atlantic convoy run where Canadian escorts, on delivering United Kingdom-bound convoys, regularly called for replenishment and refit before setting out with westbound convoys. Simpson, new to his command in the spring of 1943 and ill-informed about the desperate circumstances in which Canada had rapidly created its escort fleet, reached his own typically robust opinions about why the Canadian escorts under his purview were so poorly equipped compared to their RN counterparts. Mayne shows that Simpson helped Connolly in gathering the apparently compelling but incomplete evidence that would damn Nelles. By the fall of 1943, only twenty per cent of Canadian corvettes had been modernized as compared with virtually all their RN counterparts. Mayne stresses that the situation was being turned around (within months, seventy per cent of the corvettes were being upgraded). But this was too late for the minister, now fully engaged and alarmed about a ruinous political scandal if the true state of the fleet's equipment and efficiency became public knowledge. In November 1943, Connolly produced a lengthy document for the minister's signature castigating the naval staff for how badly the modernization of the RCN's escorts had lagged behind the Royal Navy. This included an unwelcome and simplistic assessment by Simpson as to how the problems could be solved. Nelles produced a spirited rejoinder but the conflict was resolved by firing him. The admiral was moved to a newly-created liaison position in the UK and retired a year later. Mayne includes details of how Connolly proposed four options for removing Admiral Nelles and recommended how the move to Britain could be given an appropriate "spin." (p. 199) Nelles was succeeded as CNS by Admiral Jones, a capable manager who ran a much tighter ship than his amiable predecessor.

The story of the conflict between Macdonald and Nelles about who was properly to blame for the equipment and training deficiencies in the fleet is a sad one. Both men died not long after the war—Angus L MacDonald in 1954 at age 63, while once more premier of Nova Scotia, and Percy Nelles in retirement in Victoria, in 1951, aged only fifty-nine. As for John Connolly, he returned to law after the war, and later received an appointment to the Senate.

Betrayed concentrates on the interplay and conflict between these three individuals. Obviously, this is only part of the story of the Macdonald-Nelles relationship. The recently published second volume of the navy's official operational history of the war, Douglas, Sarty and Whitby, *A Blue Water Navy* (2007), shows how the naval staff worked successfully with Macdonald during 1943 in proposing various far-reaching measures for expanding the RCN with capabilities well beyond anti-submarine escort. The minister, in turn, won the prime minister's and Cabinet approval for these initiatives, which included manning British aircraft carriers as a stepping stone to acquiring Canada's own, and fully taking over modern RN cruisers for operations in the final stages of the war against Japan. The new official history also underscores the full extent to which Canada's complete lack of readiness for war was the major factor behind the enormous challenges of rapid fleet expansion, which fundamentally accounts

for the break between the two men. Mayne points out that in the late 1930s, Nelles had, in fact, proposed naval construction programs to resuscitate Canada's moribund shipbuilding capacity. Unfortunately, all that the government sanctioned was the building of four small minesweepers in yards on both coasts in 1938. (They justified their cost five years later when the Germans mined the approaches to Halifax.) The MacKenzie King government has generally been lauded for doubling defence spending between 1936 and 1939. In fact, the starting point was very modest (\$ 17 million in 1936—just short of twice the amount spent on the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) and crept from just over three per cent of total spending to six per cent, a sum that was grossly inadequate, particularly for the industrial mobilization that was essential to achieve and sustain fleet expansion.

This welcome study illuminates many aspects of how the wartime navy functioned—the enormous organizational challenges, the stultifying effects of factionalism among the permanent force officers, and the internal loyalties among some wartime VR officers to others of civilian backgrounds. Mayne's book was originally an MA thesis, and traces of that earlier work remain. Some points are made repeatedly and the narrative is slightly laboured, thus requiring close attention by the reader. *Betrayed* has been attractively produced in paperback by the UBC Press at a reasonable price and includes excellent photographs not previously published, extensive endnotes and a comprehensive index which enables the reader to easily zero in on details. Based on careful research and rich in detail, this is a revealing look at how the strains of managing the creation of a modern navy while fighting a vicious campaign proved overwhelming for both the minister and his senior professional advisor. With its rich store of details about the machinations in naval service headquarters and among Volunteer Reserve officers at sea, this book is an essential source of information about internal dynamics within the RCN between 1940 and 1944. Fascinating.

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