

A Shared Heritage and Future - Shearwater 2008

Shearwater has been the focus of an often shared heritage in service of both our Navy and Air Force. Distinguished Canadian veterans of the Royal Naval Air Service helped establish and lead the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1924. The favour was returned by over 500 former RCAF pilots who largely staffed the second coming in 1945 of our Naval Aviation formed in 1918 and abandoned on the ending of the First World War. One of these, Robert H. Falls, was the first of our sailors to achieve the rank of full Admiral on appointment as Chief of Defence Staff. In 1975, the Air Force was richly repaid by Rear Admiral Boyle's cooperation in disbanding of the Air Branch and its mass transfer to Air Command with attendant loss of irreplaceable naval expertise, cross-trained in marine and aviation fields.

In all this, a central element has been the shared use and alternating command of Shearwater by each Service over its 90 year history. From its initial service as a flying boat base for anti-submarine patrols by the US Navy and subsequent aerodrome development for the short lived Royal Canadian Naval Air Service in 1918, it was recalled from 20 years hibernation to serve in the Second World War as RCAF Station Dartmouth. At war's end with drastic reductions in Air Force operations, it accommodated the establishment of RCN Air Section in 1946, serving as a shore base for squadrons of the Navy's first Light Fleet carrier, HMCS "Warrior". On July 1, 1948, now virtually an exclusive and fast developing naval facility, it was commissioned as RCN Air Station, HMCS "Shearwater". One of its most dramatic demonstrations of Naval Aviation's coming of age took place on the Centennial of Confederation July 1, 1967. In the ceremonial flypast down Halifax harbour, "Shearwater" launched a formation of about 80 naval aircraft and helicopters, over seven times that of RCAF Maritime Air Command, a record never before or since equaled.

Tragedy was soon to follow triumph. Against all common sense and the recommendations of an all-party special committee of Parliament, our last carrier "Bonaventure" was condemned to scrap in 1969 shortly after a mid-life refit, reducing sea going aviation to destroyer based "Sea King" helicopters. The destruction of naval aviation and a generation of hard won expertise was completed with the return of Shearwater to Air Command in 1975. Thereafter, Shearwater was progressively reduced to a shore base for the aging "Sea Kings" under what ultimately became 12 Wing of the Air Force. In a very real sense, however, Shearwater has continued to serve the Navy for virtually all of its active life. It commissioned under a flying sailor, the near legendary Captain A.B. Fraser-Harris, DSC and Bar, a member of Canada's Aviation Hall of Fame. Appropriately, it fell to another of our former naval aviators to strike the colours at the end of an era, Colonel John Cody, Shearwater's last Commanding Officer.

With infrastructure in serious disrepair, it was handed back to the Navy, relegating 12 Wing to the status of a lodger unit of CFB Halifax. Thus has the wheel again turned full circle at a time of renaissance in the rebuilding and transformation of our Forces under General Rick Hillier and a new visionary Minister of National Defence, the Honourable Peter MacKay. As noted by the article "Repairing the Neglect and Reduction of Shearwater" in the previous Newsletter, this absolutely priceless combined land, marine and air base was threatened with butchering and loss of the upper airfield to private development by hare brained action under a previous government in an "expedient" low profile transfer to Canada Lands Company at an absurd pittance of \$1.6 Million. By what can be only described as an 11th hour rescue from disaster, the MND gave notice on March 28th of the intended recovery of Shearwater to its pre-sale borders by reacquisition of the remaining lands from CLC including the fully intact long runway #16-34.

In brief, the process is proceeding and on track to the formal return of ownership to the Crown under the authority and management of DND. It signals a new and robust future for Shearwater as a highly versatile base serving individual and joint operations of elements of all three services in Canada Command and Expeditionary Force Command. Literally, the post-Soviet and 9/11 world has required a sea change in the capabilities, organization and equipping of our military and security forces, including interoperability with allies. Much has now been published in mind glazing detail on seaborne projection of power arising from the fundamental shift in focus from blue water to littoral operations.

Its essence is presented in the following two extracts of the article by Rear Admiral (Rtd) Ken Summers on "Expeditionary Command" in the "Vimy 2008" paper recently published by the Conference of Defence Associations Institute.

"The Standby Contingency Task Force is tasked with rapidly deploying a Canadian Battle Group of approximately 1,500 personnel in order to stabilize and control a developing situation. Unfortunately, the planned acquisition of the Joint Support Ships (JSS) as replacements for the ageing AORs (whose main role is that of sustaining the fleet at sea) will not provide the SCTF with the maritime capabilities needed to pre-position or deploy the force, support it during the conduct of its land operation, nor provide it with a sea based national or multi-national command facility; capabilities that can be provided by a ship similar to a naval LPD or a modified commercial container or Ro-Ro carrier."

"Rapid and effective deployment of capabilities to the target area requires special equipment. Given that 70% of the world's population is within 100 km of a coastline, and that Canada borders on three oceans and has the longest coastline in the world, a sea based capability should be viewed as an essential national requirement. The United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia, Spain and Italy have

invested in such a concept through the purchase of commercial built amphibious ships that are far less expensive than modern war-ships; are manned with but a fraction of a warship's complement ; and are readily available. Canada must develop an amphibious ability, without it, we will not be able to rapidly deploy our crisis response capabilities to the Asia-Pacific region or to littoral sections of our own country. Government must act now".

The need for timely projection and support of joint forces by sea adequate to a broad range and scale of security and humanitarian missions has been widely recognized in Canadian military and political circles. Conservative party defence policy since 2004 continues to call for strategic mobility of ground forces by amphibious ships and heavy airlift. This has been strongly championed by General Rick Hillier from the outset of his appointment as Chief of Defence Staff in 2005. It is an inherently fundamental requirement of the transformation to joint operation commands and needs of the SCTF. At the same time, he has pointedly noted the modest but glaringly inadequate capabilities of the planned Joint Support Ships for deployment of expeditionary forces. All this is reflected as well in the decision to establish a headquarters building for the SCTF in Shearwater along with the Minister's action to preserve its joint operations capabilities under DND ownership.

In light of other funding priorities, it is not entirely surprising that currently there is no provision in the just published Canada First Defence Strategy or naval plans for amphibious sea lift capability. Except for Germany, we are the only maritime power among our major allies with no significant ability to project and support our ground forces by sea since loss of "Bonaventure" in 1970. In addition to the United States, the world's leader in the technology and art of amphibious warfare, Britain, France, Holland, Spain, Italy and Australia have versatile amphibious and helicopter landing and assault ships in service and development for military or civil tasks. Holland more than pulls its weight in the NATO alliance with two fine ships and a third anticipated.

Aviation is an intrinsic and vital element of naval power and its projection in joint operations with ground forces as repeatedly demonstrated by our allies. The remarkably limp interest and provisions for this capability by our naval leaderships are a consequence of handing over army and navy aviation to the Air Force, the loss of cross-trained air and marine expertise, chronic under funding and attendant priority and preoccupation on maintaining core capabilities of the fleet. A restoration of cross-training and experience of officers as pilots and air engineers has been strongly recommended. Its objective will be to rebuild the expertise needed in planning and procurement of sea going aircraft as integral elements of our ships and to ensure the most effective use of aviation in naval and joint operations including allied forces.

Ultimately we will match the Aussies. Their choice from many NATO designs and derivatives has been thoroughly

evaluated and wisely selected in a construction program for two LHD ships of the "Canberra" class. Their exceptional versatility, advanced capabilities and potential are ideally suited to our long term requirements. They are highly efficient designs, operating with essentially the same crew strength at over five times the displacement of our "Tribal" class destroyers. Along with visiting NATO counterparts as well as the JSS, they will fit comfortably on the deep water jetty with about 1,100 feet of berthing at Shearwater. The latter's tri-service facilities, extensive renovations and additions for the multi-role naval "Cyclone", the new \$23 Million heliport and their strategic co-location with the Atlantic fleet are the envy of our allies. Shearwater's rescue from destructive break-up now assures a superb base for deployments of our expeditionary ships and forces on amphibious training, task force exercises, work ups and operational missions in the 21st century.

Meanwhile, great strides are being made in the development of long range heavy and medium airlift with the procurement of four C-17 Globemasters and the new Super Hercules C-130J transports. However, it needs to be stressed that airlift is inherently limited in application and cannot alone meet the needs of expeditionary deployments. The vital deficiency is the Navy's continuing 38 year lack of ships to deliver and support security and humanitarian forces at viable levels for overseas missions. These are overwhelmingly in the littorals with coastal access to inland areas of conflict, human suffering and natural disasters around the world. Witness the recent tragedies in the Horn of Africa, Indonesia, Thailand, India and Burma.

Whatever the mounting investment costs, any wishful illusions that the planned JSS replacements for the old fleet supply ships will meet Canada's needs for sea lift have been shattered beyond repair. If crew size can be reduced to 165, each would at most accommodate 200 troops and provide about 1,100 lane metres for open deck storage. Even if all three were available and simultaneously diverted from their primary task of fleet replenishment on each coast, they could not deploy a single fully integral and equipped composite Canadian battle or disaster relief group of 800 to 1,000 men requiring up to 7,500 lane metres of covered and open deck storage. We have seen the humiliating consequences of neglect in the GTS "Katie" charter incident and the gallant efforts by our inadequately equipped Navy to deliver timely aid at New Orleans in the wake of "Hurricane Katrina". In sea lift assignments the JSS will have a useful but very limited capacity for small operations in unopposed landings, particularly where dockside berthing is available. Like Hellyer's eye rolling make over of the Forces, no other nation has been inspired to follow the all singing and dancing JSS concept, an inherent conflict and compromise of major fleet replenishment and minor sea lift capabilities.

Of all the vessels now in operation or development, the "Canberra" class LHD would be an ideal choice and the most cost effective, especially if procured in series production with the Australian Navy. Principal characteristics are summarized in the foot notes.

Increasingly, tactical aviation has become a vital requirement and integral element of naval and ground forces alike for combined as well as autonomous operations at home and overseas in defence of our security and national interests. The ultimate expression in terms of global mobility and power in littoral missions is to be seen in the harmonized development of US Navy carrier and Marine forces over the past 70 years. Our need has finally been recognized by establishment of three operational and a support command for domestic and overseas service. They will draw upon each of the three arms as force generators and suppliers for creation of composite task forces of the required mix and level of integrated land, sea and air power. Once again the pendulum of change and demand swings, often with unexpected consequences. In this, Shearwater's strategic location and powerful versatility have been and will continue to be a priceless defence asset. The near butchering and reduction of the 1,500 acre complex to a helicopter only capability would have been an enormous folly, destruction and waste. As airfield, marine and joint operations develop powerfully, far beyond the fractional utility by 12 Wing, it will re-commission as CFB Shearwater in the service of all three arms, other federal departments, NATO allies and Canada and Expeditionary Force Commands.

Transformation has been well served by the appointment of Rear Admiral Paul Maddison as Maritime and Joint Task Force Commander Atlantic. He brings a timely background of expertise in planning and leadership of the Contingency Task Force, including its exploratory amphibious exercises from Shearwater to Florida in the "borrowed" USS "Gunston Hall", a Marine Corps landing and assault ship. Despite the present stand down of the SCTF, studies are continuing on seaborne concepts and requirements at the Maritime Warfare Centre in Halifax.

Interesting times indeed are ahead as our political and military leaderships and especially those of the Navy, come to grips with the rising threats and immense challenges of a deeply troubled world. Free of parochial inclinations, turf and funding battles, it will require first class global mobility and support of our Forces by sea and air on joint operations to defend Canada's interests, economic well being and values at home and beyond our borders with the United States and other staunch allies. In this, Shearwater's strategic location and base capabilities are destined to play a major role in support of our naval and combined forces on joint operations and deployments in Atlantic and overseas theatres.

FOOT NOTE

(1) Australian "Canberra" Class

Type - Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD)

Displacement - 27,850 tonnes

Length - 760 feet

Beam - 105 feet

Draft - 23.5 feet

Propulsion - combined diesel & gas turbine

Speed - 20.5 knots

Range - 8,000 nautical miles at 15 knots

Endurance - 50 days before replenishment

Troops - 1,124

Crew - 243

Landing Craft - 4 LCM

Operations - command & control facilities

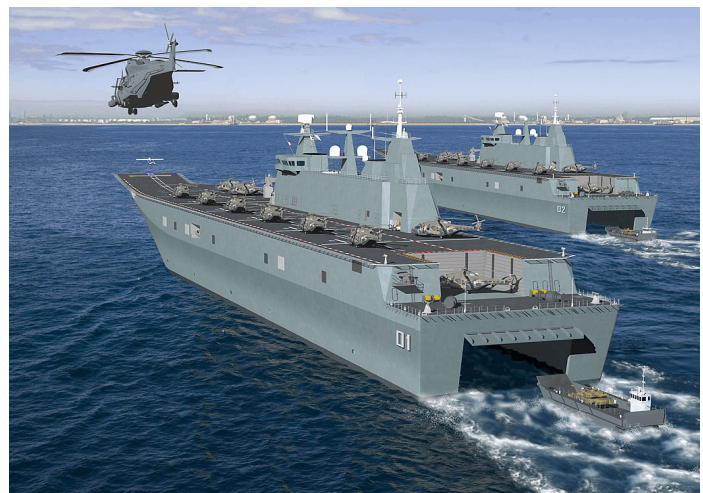
Aviation - 24 helicopters, ski ramp for F-35B fighter

Hospital - full casualty service

Program Cost - Less than Tribal destroyer replacement

(2) Advances in technology are revolutionizing naval force efficiency. The cost per capita in personnel recruiting, training, accommodation, medical services, pay, allowances and pensions is staggering, particularly for highly skilled trades. It is reflected in the enormous \$250 Billion allocated to personnel costs in the Canada First Defence Plan. This amounts to over 50% of the entire \$489 Billion budget for defence over the next 20 years. Crew efficiency is therefore a major aim of modern ship and overall fleet design. Australia's "Canberra" reflects the remarkable progress being achieved through automatic, computer controlled and managed systems and the complete shift from steam to diesel and gas turbine power. Though over 7,000 tons heavier, it requires an operating crew about one-third of our last carrier, "Bonaventure". Such improvements in sea going efficiency can have a powerful multiplier reduction in overall manpower requirements and costs, both civil and military.

Ralph Fisher – Sea Horse Group



Australian "Canberra" Class Expeditionary Ships

