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THE ORGANIZING OF THE EAST COAST PATROLS 1914-1918

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As everyone knows, the part played by Canada on the seas during the first Great War was a minor one, chiefly because before that war two rival naval policies, growing in the over-rich soil of partisanship, had run to stalk and leaves, producing almost no fruit. In several ways, nevertheless, Canada contributed to the discomfiture of the enemy at sea. These efforts were exerted through or in conjunction with the Royal Navy, for the Canadian naval forces had been placed at the disposal of the Admiralty with the outbreak of war, as provided for in the Naval Service Act of 1910.¹ One of these contributions to local and general defence was the development of an auxiliary patrol fleet in and near the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The story of this flotilla is almost unknown.

In an earlier age the warship was by no means the highly specialized vessel which she has since become. For the most part she was a merchant ship used in time of war for fighting, and Henry VII of England was accustomed during the periods of peace which he so dearly loved, to hire out to merchants his men-of-war.² Before the end of the nineteenth century, however, a warship had become as different from any vessel built for peaceful ends as a suit of armour is from a suit of clothes. Accordingly, when the first Great War broke out, no one had foreseen that such inoffensive little craft as fishing-boats, yachts, excursion-boats, and tugs, would have any significant naval part to play at all. Yet in the course of that war Great Britain was obliged to mobilize for warlike purposes an auxiliary navy of nearly four thousand small commercial or pleasure craft, manned by almost fifty thousand officers and men.³ She was, in fact, compelled, in order to command the sea, to employ two distinct navies instead of just one, each of a most formidable size. On a much smaller scale the same was true of the other Allied powers with maritime interests.

Prior to that war the submarine mine and the submarine had been adjuncts of practically every navy; nevertheless, although commerce-raiding was an old story, it had been generally assumed for various reasons that these two modern devices would be used against warships and transports only. Consequently, when the German Navy loosed them both against the merchant ships, defensive measures were almost wholly wanting and had to be improvised in all haste. The mine and the submarine are two of the most furtive and elusive products of the Industrial Revolution. They walk in darkness and destroy in the noonday: and so menacing did their activities along the sea routes become, that it seemed not only that the Allies would suffer defeat, but also that sea-power itself, in any positive sense, had passed away. As time went on, however, many means were found to counter this dire threat. Each was a palliative rather than a cure;

¹19-10 Edw. VII, ch. 43, sec. 23.

²W. L. Clowes (ed.), *The Royal Navy* (London, 1897-1903), I, 439.

³Archibald Hurd, *The Merchant Navy* (London and New York, 1921-9), I, 257.

yet in their aggregate they enabled the war to be won. The mines were sought by patrol craft and removed by minesweepers. Various were the means employed against submarines, the most important being escorted convoys, and the patrolling of known or likely hunting-grounds by vessels armed with guns and depth-charges. It was for these duties that the small ships which formed the auxiliary flotillas were taken over, armed and equipped, and sent forth.

The waters of the east coast of Canada were part of the Royal Navy's North America and West Indies Station, which comprised the western Atlantic to the east of North America. The naval force stationed there consisted almost entirely of cruisers—the headquarters were at Bermuda, while Jamaica and Halifax were also important bases. To guard the trade routes and ports against surface raiders was, after the outbreak of war, the principal duty of the squadron. Its strength varied from time to time according to means and needs. In March, 1915, for example, it consisted of one old battleship, and eleven cruisers of which two were French, two Australian, and one, the *Niobe*, Canadian.⁴ During the early weeks of the war the Admiralty was much afraid that raiders would harass the northern part of the station, and at one time rumours in Canada propelled a German cruiser into Cabot Strait.⁵ In fact, however, no enemy appeared in those waters, through which an unobstructed stream of shipping flowed, and by the end of the year all over the seas the surface raiders were under control.

Halifax had long been a defended port and naval base, and when the war began, its defences, as far as they went, were conceived in terms of a raid by surface ships, and were cut to the same pattern as were those at similar ports throughout the British Empire. The fixed defences were in the hands of the army, and the mobile ones in those of the naval authorities. Early in the war the usual expedients of an examination service, war signal station, net-defence, and minesweepers, were instituted there, and extended to other ports; while a coastal patrol on a limited scale was begun. During the summer of 1915 a patrol had been kept on the Newfoundland coast by the governments of that colony and of Great Britain. By the end of the season it had become evident to all concerned—the governments of Canada and Newfoundland and the Commander-in-Chief of the North America and West Indies Station—that it was desirable to co-ordinate this work with that of the Canadian flotilla. An arrangement was accordingly made whereby the Canadian patrols became responsible for the whole Canadian coast, and for the shores of Newfoundland, except that part extending from St. Pierre eastward and northward to Belle Isle which the Newfoundland ships were to patrol. In other words, the Canadian patrols were to watch the coasts which bordered the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the open-sea coast of the Maritime Provinces. The senior officer of the Canadian flotilla was to command the whole, and the ships were to be interchanged if necessary.⁶ During the season of 1916 the Canadian patrol and minesweeping vessels were twelve in number, of which five were on duty at Halifax, while seven

⁴Arthur W. Jose, *The Royal Australian Navy, 1914-1918* (Sydney, 1928), 252.

⁵Sir Julian Corbett and Henry Newbolt, *History of the Great War: Naval Operations* (London, 1920-31), I, 50-1; Hurd, *Merchant Navy*, I, 250.

⁶Material in the Department of the Naval Service Records, Ottawa (hereafter referred to as N.S.), Series 1065-4-1, 2, and 3.

patrolled in the gulf, and of the Newfoundland ships there were three.⁷ These vessels were armed with 3- or 6-pounder guns, and, as their fewness implies, their function was a limited one. They provided coastal and port patrols—a war-time naval coastguard service.

Meanwhile Germany's naval designers had been working very hard, and her yards were turning out submarines greatly superior to their predecessors in size, armament, and cruising radius. The possibility consequently arose that submarines might cross the Atlantic, and in April, 1916, the Admiralty, whose responsibilities were almost unlimited, sounded a warning. This was to the effect that any submarines which might operate near the Newfoundland or Canadian coasts would probably be U-boats of the latest type, and that nothing smaller than a 12-pounder gun was in the least likely to put them out of action.⁸ This despatch was full of weighty submarine lore, learned in the school of bitter experience. In May the Commander-in-Chief also warned the Canadian authorities: "It should be clearly understood that, should enemy submarines appear off the Canadian Coasts, my cruisers are no protection to Transports against submarine attacks."⁹ No raiders appeared that summer; nevertheless in November the Admiralty sent word that in view of the activity of German submarines in the north Atlantic, the twelve existing patrol vessels ought to be increased in number to about thirty-six, and offered to lend an officer experienced in patrol work to advise the Canadian government, and, if desirable, to command the patrols.¹⁰

The Canadian government's reply went across a few days later in these words: "As danger to Admiralty store transports and Canadian trade in near future from enemy submarines appears to be growing serious, Canadian Government considers adequate protection should be accorded by Admiralty."¹¹ To support this claim the government stated that in the early months of the war it had asked the Admiralty whether or not Canada should undertake to supplement the naval defence of the Empire, and had received the reply that this was unnecessary and that Canada's efforts should be concentrated on the provision of military forces.¹² The government's case also rested upon the fact that every available man with naval training, and every spare gun, had been scraped together and sent to England. The problem was further made difficult because the fishing-boats on the Canadian coasts, unlike the trawlers and drifters which operated out of the ports in Britain, were not considered suitable for patrol work. Nor were more than a handful of other ships that could be used available either in Canada or in the United States. The other side of the picture was that although unrestricted submarine warfare had not yet formally begun, the Admiralty already had tremendous responsibilities and commitments in waters where submarines were not merely feared, but were

⁷N.S. 1065-7-2 (1), Memorandum by the Director of the Naval Service (Admiral Kingsmill), Jan. 26, 1917.

⁸N.S. 1065-4-1 (1), Admiralty to Colonial Office, April 8, 1916; copy.

⁹*Ibid.*, Commander-in-Chief to Director of the Naval Service, May 22, 1916; copy.

¹⁰N.S. 1065-7-2 (1), Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Governor-General, Nov. 11, 1916; copy of cablegram. A similar message was sent to the Newfoundland government.

¹¹*Ibid.*, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, Nov. 17, 1916.

¹²*Ibid.*, Dec. 28, 1916.

actually swarming. The Admiralty therefore for a while longer declined to provide for the east coast patrols.¹³

Accordingly the Canadian government, receding from its first position, reported that it was making every effort to buy or build the necessary ships, and asked the Admiralty to provide guns and trained men for them. It also suggested that the cruiser *Rainbow*, stationed on the west coast, should be paid off, and that some of her men and guns should be used for the new patrol vessels,¹⁴ and this was done. The government bought a number of suitable ships, and arranged for twelve trawlers to be built at the Vickers yard in Montreal, and at Polson's in Toronto. Attempts were also made to obtain guns in the United States, and later in Japan, but without success. At this point Sir Robert Borden stepped into the picture by sending a personal cablegram to the First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Edward Carson, asking for guns and trained gunnery ratings. The required number of ships were available or in prospect; but these would be useless without guns and men to fire them.¹⁵

Borden's appeal for help had only just been received when the German submarine campaign suddenly entered a new and much more menacing phase. On January 31, 1917, the German government announced to the world its decision to wage unrestricted submarine warfare, declaring that shipping found in the Mediterranean and the north-eastern Atlantic would thenceforth be sunk at sight. The newcomer to the seas was making his own rules as the game proceeded. This declaration did not apply to Canadian and Newfoundland waters; yet, besides greatly complicating the problem on the European side of the Atlantic, it intensified the potential danger elsewhere. The combined result of Borden's appeal and of the increased danger was that the Admiralty began at this time to contribute largely to the resources of the east coast patrols, and this support was continued to the end. Carson replied to the Prime Minister, offering to release to the Canadian government a sufficient number of 12-pounder guns, which the Admiralty had ordered from a firm in the United States, to arm the flotilla, and promising that everything possible would be done about the gunners.¹⁶ The Admiralty went much further than this, moreover, for it asked the Canadian government to arrange for and supervise the building of thirty-six trawlers and a hundred drifters. These were to be built in Canada at the expense of the British government. The Admiralty undertook to furnish the designs, and implied that some of the vessels would be added to the Canadian patrols.¹⁷ The Dominion government arranged to have the vessels constructed, distributing the work among the principal shipbuilders in Eastern Canada.

Neither these vessels, nor the dozen trawlers which the Canadian government had ordered for itself, were available during the summer of 1917. In the spring the Admiralty's expert arrived and was placed in command of the patrols. His tenure of office was brief, however, for wherever he went he trod a wine-press filled with other people's toes; so the Admiralty recalled him and the patrols saw him no more. Captain Walter Hose,

¹³*Ibid.*, Colonial Secretary to Governor-General, Jan. 10, 1917.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Governor-General to Colonial Secretary, Jan. 16, 1917.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Jan. 27, 1917.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, Colonial Secretary to Governor-General, Feb. 8, 1917.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Feb. 5, 1917.

R.C.N., who had formerly commanded the *Rainbow*, was appointed Captain of Patrols and held that position until the end of the war.

The commander of a German submarine entering the area in question had a choice of objectives. He might try to attack the coastwise traffic or the fishing fleets; or he might turn his attention to the stream of shipping which flowed between the Canadian ports and Europe, chiefly Great Britain. Ships might be attacked either in port or at sea; a harbour and its immediate approaches, however, are relatively easy to protect against naval forces, largely because the vulnerable area is very restricted. The greatest threat, therefore, was to ships at sea, and of these by far the most important, and the most difficult to safeguard, were the ones which plied between Canada and Europe. The route was one of the main channels through which supplies flowed to Great Britain from the outside world. It was very short and therefore economical of ships. It tapped the resources of the greater part of the North American continent which included by far the greatest industrial area outside Europe. The route was frequented by troop transports, and it is difficult to think of anything which governments in war-time fear more than the loss of these. Along it too, in a westerly direction, came ships bringing gold from Great Britain to Canada.

A raider, whether surface or submarine, is unlikely to find good hunting in the open spaces of the ocean, for there the ships which he is seeking to capture or destroy have a choice of many routes. For this reason raiders generally operate at those points where traffic is compelled to concentrate—near straits, off prominent headlands, or near a terminus. The waters off Canada and Newfoundland were well adapted to a raider's work, at least in the summer; for they contained a number of places where the traffic, both inward-bound and outward, was forced to concentrate. The most important of these areas lay off Cape Race, in Cabot and Belle Isle Straits, in the upper reaches of the gulf near Anticosti, and off Halifax and Sydney. Along those coasts too, the land surrenders reluctantly to the sea, the continental shelf projecting itself outward for many miles to form a broad belt of water shallow enough in many places to permit of mines being laid,¹⁸ or of submarines resting on the bottom. The coasts of Newfoundland, Labrador, and Canada, were in great part unsettled, and dotted along them were innumerable inlets where a submarine might go for rest and minor repairs, or in order to meet a supply-ship.¹⁹ In the raider's favour also was the immense area of the region to be patrolled, and the consequent length of the coast-lines surrounding and within it. The special disadvantage of those waters from the point of view of German submarines, was the great distance from home or from any friendly territory.

The last summer of the war saw a great increase in the size and effectiveness of the flotilla, as the newly-built trawlers and drifters became available after the St. Lawrence opened in the spring. Modern war is insatiable, however, and the plans now called for an auxiliary fleet of a hundred and twelve vessels, in place of the thirty-six which the Admiralty had recommended a year and a half before. "In view of the vital interests at stake," wrote the Commander-in-Chief on March 2, "and the natural geographical features which offer so strong an inducement to the enemy to undertake a submarine and mine offensive in the area mentioned against Allied troop

¹⁸They could be laid effectively in depths up to a hundred fathoms.

and cargo vessels and convoys as soon as weather and ice conditions admit, I cannot but regard the position as involving very grave risks, and feel it my duty to urge that every effort be made to have the whole flotilla completely equipped and organized and at work in their assigned positions at as early a date as possible."¹⁹ Like so many human endeavours, the construction of the trawlers and drifters was slower than had been anticipated; nevertheless, soon after the river opened, nearly fifty patrol ships were available, and by early October the auxiliary fleet consisted of a hundred and sixteen vessels. Eighty-seven of these belonged to the Admiralty and the rest to the Canadian Naval Service; but all except those attached to Halifax were under the Captain of Patrols. The twelve trawlers belonging to the Naval Service were modelled on the North Sea fishing-vessels of that name. They were sea-worthy boats of a hundred and thirty-six tons and a speed of ten knots, and they had cost \$191,000 each to build. The commercial or pleasure boats which had been taken over for the patrols were of various types. Several had been obtained from other government departments, a number were bought in the United States, and three had been Canadian-owned private yachts.²⁰ One of these last, the *Grilse*, was a most formidable little craft for a patrol-boat, since she carried two 12-pounders and a torpedo tube, and could travel at thirty-two knots. The Admiralty drifters were fitted with a 6-pounder gun apiece, while most of the others mounted a 12-pounder. All carried depth-charges—from two to six per ship—and a large number were fitted with wireless.²¹ They had the status of warships and flew the White Ensign.

They were obviously not dreadnoughts, nor did their work require that they should be. Between them and the German battleships stood the Grand Fleet, and in order to reach them, hostile cruisers would have had to pass both the British cruisers in Europe and those of the North America and West Indies squadron. It was in order to deal with submarines, against which the battleships and cruisers could give little protection, that the auxiliary patrols had been called into existence. What was required for this purpose was not powerful ships which can never be very numerous, but a large number of vessels capable of dealing with a submarine, preferably single-handed. These being many could scatter widely, to sweep up mines, to reconnoitre, or to stand on guard—

Each degree of Latitude
Strung about Creation
Seeth one (or more) of us. . . .

They could attack a hostile submarine on the surface with gun-fire, and with depth-charges if submerged. By these means, with luck and good management, they could destroy the submarine, or damage it, or drive it away.

The area which the east coast patrols had to cover extended from Belle Isle to the Bay of Fundy, and from Rimouski to the Virgin Rocks. Their sole purpose was to protect shipping in those waters, and as they increased in numbers this protection assumed various forms and they ceased to be

¹⁹N.S. 1065-7-6 (1), Commander-in-Chief to Admiral Superintendent, Halifax, March 2, 1918.

²⁰N.S. 1001-5-1, Digest by the Assistant Naval Secretary.

²¹N.S. 1065-7-6 (1), Memorandum for the Admiralty, July 18, 1918; copy.

merely coastal patrols. The principal ports were Halifax, Sydney, Montreal, and Quebec. Halifax was at all times important, but particularly so in winter when it became the principal shipping centre. Being also the chief Canadian naval base, British and other warships frequented it and it had always to be carefully watched. Sydney with the coal-mines close by was the most important fuelling-station on the coast. The two St. Lawrence ports served the larger part of the shipping during the open season. The difficult river navigation was their protection; but the stretch below them where the river slowly merges into the gulf had to be watched. During the season of 1918, the flotilla was divided into three roughly equal groups, one of which looked after Halifax. The channels leading to the port had to be swept every day, and the harbour itself patrolled. Merchant ships and transports about to sail in convoy necessarily left the harbour one by one, and were placed in convoy formation outside. Patrol vessels were therefore assigned to protect them while they were forming up, and in general to watch the approaches to the port. For the same purposes a second group of vessels was stationed at Sydney. In addition, the coasts of the whole area were patrolled, in order to watch for suspicious craft and for mines, and to investigate any reports received from the shore of unusual and possibly sinister doings. The positions of special strategic importance, which have already been mentioned, had to be watched. Escorts were provided for convoys moving along the coast, and to accompany for some distance to sea the slower convoys sailing to Great Britain. The third group of patrol vessels attended to these various duties.

Even little patrol ships must have bases, and with these the region was well supplied. There are many harbours along those coasts, and even the smaller ones could accommodate these vessels. With one exception, all the patrol craft were coal-burners for which a supply of good fuel was obtained from the mines on Cape Breton. The three principal bases were at Sydney, Halifax, and St. John's, Newfoundland. The headquarters of the east coast patrols, and the main base for most of the vessels, were at Sydney, the easiest port at which to coal, and admirably situated with relation to the whole gulf area from the strategic point of view. The vessels protecting Halifax and its approaches were based on that port, and nearly all extensive repairs were done there, minor ones often being carried out elsewhere. The main base for the Newfoundland ships was at St. John's. A number of other ports, among them Gaspé, were used as cruising bases for the more distant patrols. Those vessels whose duties took them away from their bases ordinarily spent slightly more than a third of their time in port for supplies, repairs, rest, and training.

The manning of the flotilla had been a matter of extreme difficulty, since practically all the trained naval personnel in Canada had been pre-empted long before, and no adequate steps had been taken well in advance to train complements for the greatly enlarged auxiliary fleet. The Admiralty and the Naval Service between them, however, had contrived to rake up officers and men, some of those sent over from England being Canadian volunteer reservists who had been serving in trawlers off the British coast. There were barely enough to go around, and a large proportion were inexperienced. "The officers and men of the vessels are untrained," reported their commander, "not only in the technical knowledge

required to handle the weapons and offensive appliances on board the ships, but also in service discipline being drafted to ships as hardly more than raw recruits."²² By the end of the war there were nearly two thousand ranks and ratings serving in the east coast patrols.

This improvised organization was never called upon to deal with any very sustained or serious attack. Not until the summer of 1918 did the German submarines assault shipping in those waters; and when at last they came their behaviour was passive and discreet. This unwonted abstention from *Schrecklichkeit* was attributed by the Captain of Patrols to their being on their way home and to their mission in those waters being largely to spy out the nakedness of the land.²³ They sank, nevertheless, a considerable number of fishing-boats and other ships.

A few staccato generalizations are perhaps in order. The east coast patrols were a successful venture in imperial co-operation—mainly between the services, for in purely naval matters the governments did not intervene. The Admiralty prescribed the general policy, which was carried out by officers responsible to the Department of the Naval Service. The Admiralty on the whole acted with restraint and tact, and the Canadian service cheerfully accepted its subordinate role. "Knowing full well we have not a proper organization," wrote its director, "we have most warmly appreciated and acted on the advice of the Admiralty on every occasion."²⁴ The technical advantages of this close association, to the smaller service, are evident at every turn. The relatively large share in the cost of the ship-building programme borne by the Admiralty is noticeable; but any verdict on this matter will, of course, depend upon the opinion of the judge as to what Canada's responsibilities really were. The close common interest of Canada and Newfoundland in any scheme of naval defence on the east coast is clearly revealed. In their joint patrol arrangements, the relations of Newfoundland with Canada were very similar to those existing between Canada and Great Britain in matters naval. No doubt the presence of three authorities was partly responsible for the slowness with which the programme developed.

The difficulties and dangers which lie in unpreparedness for war, given the type of world in which we have had to live, are apparent enough throughout. It is not always recognized, however, that of all forms of defence, naval defence is the most difficult to improvise rapidly. The patrols were probably as efficient as circumstances permitted; nevertheless the bricks which the Israelites were forced to make without straw were not necessarily the best in Egypt. The flotilla suffered from two irremediable weaknesses, one being the scarcity of trained officers and men. The other was a lack of supporting destroyers or their equivalent, for there was only one well-armed vessel available capable of quickly reinforcing a threatened area. In view of an opinion which is sometimes expressed, it is worth noting that the Canadian government reacted to the threat of hostile submarines off the coast precisely as governments with large maritime interests have always done on similar occasions.

The east coast patrols were a necessary precaution, and may have been a strong deterrent as well. They also, with the auxiliary fleets elsewhere,

²²N.S. 1065-7-12 (1), Captain of Patrols to Secretary, N.S., Sept. 24, 1918.

²³*Ibid.*, Oct. 21, 1918.

²⁴N.S. 1065-7-2 (1), Memorandum by Admiral Kingsmill, Jan. 16, 1917.

built up a large part of that foundation of experience on which the present campaign against the submarines is based. The flotilla was prolific of precedents. It was the first fleet to be commanded by an officer of the Royal Canadian Navy. It contained the first ships built expressly for the Naval Service. It faced the first direct naval attack in the history of the Dominion.

DISCUSSION

Mr. Lower said that he found it hard to believe that enemy submarines or supply ships could have used the inlets of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland without observation. In regard to the creation of a second navy, the auxiliary patrol, to deal with war-time emergencies, he said that although it formed in a sense a separate arm, nevertheless there was a remarkable degree of integration between it and the regular service.

Mr. Lower remarked that the paper created the opportunity for a discussion of the whole question of the defensive position of the continent's east coast. Canada's role was necessarily tactical rather than strategic. We have to defend the ports and the approaches to our own coasts. The strategic problem of defending the whole continent was a much larger one, with which the United States must primarily be concerned. Americans have created off their west coast a defensive wall 2,000 miles off shore. On the east, however, even with the recently acquired bases in Newfoundland and the West Indies, the defences are a short 600 miles out. A defensive wall 2,000 miles to the east, as on the west, would run through Ireland, the Azores, and the Canaries. Behind this outer screen, Canadians would find their natural sphere and character of operations. But will the United States ever create such a screen? She must act soon!