

The Newfyjohn Solution: Newfoundland's Role in the Battle of the Atlantic During the Second World War.

Presented at the Mari-Tech 2016 Conference & Exhibition, The Canadian Institute of Marine Engineering (CIMarE), *St. Johns Convention Centre*, St. John's, NL, May 4-6, 2016.

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As advertised, I'm a Second World War Canadian naval historian, and I've been researching and writing on St. John's' role as the Royal Canadian Navy's main convoy escort base during the Battle of the Atlantic for close to thirty years. Throughout that time, especially as a graduate student, people often enquired as to the focus of my studies. My answer has always been "The Newfoundland Escort Force" formed by the RCN at St John's in June 1941. This explanation often elicited a quizzical look from the inquirer and usually an abrupt change of conversation. Academics are used to such odd reactions to their work. Whether an archaeologist excavating an 18th-century barracks' site on Signal Hill or a biologist studying the mating habits of northern shrimp at the Ocean Sciences Centre at Logy Bay, we all get strange looks at one time or another when we talk about our research - it goes with the territory. Ultimately, we all interpret them as meaning the same thing - "Oh, that's nice. How boring!"

This changed for me a few years ago. I was presenting a conference paper at the University of New Brunswick, and at one of the receptions that always go along with such academic gab-fests, I was chatting with a young female graduate student. Eventually, the conversation came around, as it always does, to the nature of my studies. I replied, per usual, "the Newfoundland Escort Force" and received the kind of wide-eyed reaction I'd come to expect. However, instead of immediately changing the subject, as was typical in these cases, this young lady regarded me with such complete disapproval -

those of you with daughters know exactly what I'm talking about - and said, "You study Newfoundland call girls?"

Well, the lights came on, and the band began to play! All those quizzical looks over all those years were not silent commentary as to the dullness of my subject but, rather, surprise that I'd apparently earned all of my degrees studying the working habits of my local *Ladies of the Night*. How this young woman imagined I'd conducted my research, I can only guess.

I have since learned my lesson. Now when somebody asks, I simply say that I study the development of St. John's as a naval base during the Second World War. And, if I may, that's what I'd like to talk about this afternoon.

This weekend marks 71 years since the end of the Battle of the Atlantic – 3 September 1939 to 8 May 1945 – the longest continuous campaign of the most destructive conflict in human history. To most Canadians, the Atlantic War embodies the sacrifice of the *Jervis Bay*; the destruction of HMS *Hood*, and the subsequent sinking of the German super-battleship *Bismarck*. People remember the U-boats, wolfpacks, and epic convoy battles: the *North Atlantic Run*, the *Triangle Run*, and the infamous *Murmansk Run*. They recall the thousands of sailors who fought both the enemy and the weather - in equal measure - on one of the world's most unforgiving oceans, and the thousands of men and women who died there. And rightly so!

But we seldom reflect on the thousands who also fought the Battle of the Atlantic at the hundreds of naval bases and defended ports that ringed the North Atlantic during the Second World War. These people protected the harbours, monitored the radio, radar and huff/duff stations, repaired the ships and cared for their crews - both in sickness and

in health - fed them, clothed them, paid them, trained them, and entertained them. Oft times, these people and the bases they operated are overlooked.

This is certainly the case with HMCS *Avalon* here at St. John's –affectionately known throughout the North Atlantic during the Second World War as *Newfyjohn*. If you asked the average Canadian where Canada's most important “boots on the ground” convoy escort base was during the Battle of the Atlantic, most would probably say Halifax...if they could answer at all. Few would ever guess it was actually St. John's, Newfoundland.

In all fairness, this is not really that surprising. Second World War naval bases weren't very glamorous, and they came and went as the war progressed. Even historians, on both sides of the conflict, often simply present them as a *fait accompli* - wharves were built, oil tanks installed, ships repaired, etc. – without any explanation or elaboration. The myriad details as to how one builds and operates a naval facility in wartime are conspicuous by their absence in the literature. But such things are important because a naval force's success at sea is inextricably bound up with its support ashore. This was especially so for the fledgling Royal Canadian Navy during the Battle of the Atlantic; the RCN's defence of the North Atlantic convoy network was a direct reflection of the efficiency, maintenance and training capabilities of the shore establishments.

HMCS *Avalon* was no exception, and I have always thought it unfair that *Newfyjohn* has been mostly ignored - or even worse, denigrated - in the literature. I've read that St. John's “had little to offer the Escort Force” and the base here resembled a “travelling tent show” with the Newfoundland Command working out of a bunch of hotel

rooms, and the ships of the Newfoundland Escort Force tied up at “rickety South Side wharves.”

The truth is, by the summer of 1942, barely a year after the first ships of the NEF sailed through the Narrows, the Newfoundland Command operated out of a modern, combined-Royal Canadian Navy/Royal Canadian Air Force Headquarters on Plymouth Road; the newly-built RCN hospital on Cavell Street was fully functional, as were His Majesty’s Canadian Dockyard and the naval barracks at Buckmasters’ Field. And those “rickety” moorings along the Southside? They were actually all up to naval standards. Meanwhile, escort operations started *a mere week* after the NEF arrived at St. John’s - months before the first nail for the base was even hammered - and upwards of 200 convoys comprising thousands of merchant ships were safely escorted to Britain that first year.

Not bad for a traveling tent show!

Certainly, HMCS *Avalon* was born out of crises, and the Newfoundland Command was continually forced to play catch-up by the ever-changing war at sea and decisions made in Argentina, Ottawa, Washington and London, often without any local consultation. Yet, despite tremendous challenges, *Newfyjohn* was a surprisingly efficient, well-run operation, not the “seat of the pants” arrangement popular in post-war accounts.

Over the course of the Atlantic war, in excess of 500 RCN warships were posted at *Newfyjohn* and hundreds of American, British, and later Halifax- and Sydney-based escort vessels – the ships of the famous *Triangle Run* - used St. John’s as a turnaround port. Personnel at HMCS *Avalon* rose from less than 1000 in 1940 to upwards of 7,000

men *and* women by Germany's surrender in May 1945, and thousands of ships' crew were accommodated at the naval barracks.

As a port of refuge, more than 6,000 survivors - including U-boat POWs - were landed and cared for at St. John's, and thousands of merchant seamen and visiting servicemen found respite at the various hostels established throughout the City.

By way of example, *The Caribou Hut* across from the National War Memorial - a short walk from here - served more than 1,500,000 meals, rented in excess of 250,000 beds, showed over 1500 movies, and hosted close to 500 dances, with a total attendance of more than of 700,000 people over its five years' operation - this in a city with a pre-war population of 40,000.

HMCS *Avalon* accomplished all that was asked of it. It asserted Ottawa's special interest in Newfoundland in the face of the American "friendly invasion" resulting from the famous 1941 "destroyers for bases deal". More so, *Newfyjohn* highlighted Canada's contribution to the Allied war effort by facilitating "the safe and timely arrival" of over 25,000 RCN-escorted merchant ships in the United Kingdom over the course of the war – the legendary *North Atlantic Run*.

I am honoured to be here this afternoon. And on this, the 71st Anniversary of the end of the Second World War, I ask you to remember not only those who fought the Battle of the Atlantic on the high seas, but also the men and women who fought it at the many naval outposts, large and small, across the North Atlantic - from Red Bay, Labrador to Liverpool, England - but most especially here at St. John's.

My book is called *The Newfyjohn Solution* and I chose that title with special care. Admiral Sir Percy Noble, Commander-in-Chief, Northwest Approaches during the

darkest days of the Battle of the Atlantic, claimed that the Royal Canadian Navy “solved the problem of the North Atlantic convoys.” My book argues that *Newfyjohn* was the key to that *Solution*.