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REVIEW ESSAY

# The RCN at War

Dean Oliver

Frank Curry. *War At Sea: A Canadian Seaman On The North Atlantic*. Toronto: Lugus Productions, 1990.

Edward C. Meyers. *Thunder in the Morning Calm: The Royal Canadian Navy in Korea, 1950-1955*. St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 1992.

These books have very similar objectives. Curry's account of convoy duty in the North Atlantic during World War II attempts "to provide the view from the lower deck," (p.x.) a perspective he notes has been altogether lacking in Canadian naval literature. Edward C. Meyers likewise surveys the RCN's role in "Canada's Forgotten War" "from the point of view of the ordinary sailors," and in addition seeks to depict what he refers to as "the darker side of life in those ships," their chronically unstable morale. (p.viii) There are other similarities. Both men served on the ships of which they write, Curry on HMCS *Kamsack* and *Caraquet* and Meyers on HMCS *Cayuga*, both bring to their task heartfelt sympathy for the travails of their shipmates and a vast store of entertaining, often shocking, anecdotes. Still, these books are markedly different in both approach and content and the authors have not fulfilled their self-imposed requirements with a uniform degree of success.

Curry's book is really about endurance and survival. In it there are two enemies: the Germans and the North Atlantic. His recollections, based on a diary kept at the time, constitute a gritty paean to the men of the

North Atlantic run. There is little here concerning the strategy and tactics of naval warfare or the politics of the war effort. In keeping with its objective, *War At Sea* relates in gripping detail the ordinary seaman's ongoing struggle with wind and water, interspersed with periods of frantic and terrifying action and the all-to-brief but sanity-restoring respites in friendly ports.

It is possible to find minor flaws with this book. It is at times repetitive and one wishes Curry had said more regarding his shore leaves, for example, or the day-to-day command arrangements on board ship, especially during combat. The superb photos have no captions and there is no index. But these are minor failings. Curry's book reveals the horrors of war through his tense vigils as an ASDIC operator, the sickeningly rapid and potentially deadly appearance of "white mist," the endless watches and bone-chilling winter patrols, and the ceaseless threat of submarine attack, in a style that is both lively and endearing. This "ordinary" sailor whose leave was spent more often than not on long coastal walks or in the plush chairs of the local library has produced a far from ordinary account of a truly extraordinary war.

*Thunder in the Morning Calm* shares some of the strengths of Curry's book, but is in general far less satisfying. Basing his research on the individual ships' records, Meyers recounts the RCN's experiences with South Korean marines, Allied warships, Chinese troop trains, shore batteries, and each other. Pedicab races through Sasebo, Japan and train-shooting contests off Tanch'on, Korea occupy pride of place with the daring evacuation of Chinnampo and tales of *Cayuga's* canine mascot, Alice. The chapter on the "Great Imposter," the irrepressible Ferdinand Waldo Demara, is a bona fide page turner. Meyers' opinions are often refreshingly frank and caustic and he sprinkles his work with brief commentaries on the land conflict, helping to place the RCN's effort in broader perspective. This is a highly readable work, even if lacking the high drama of lethal games of cat-and-mouse with German wolf packs. Meyers, after all, can hardly be faulted for the paucity of North Korean and Chinese naval resources.

Meyers devotes considerable space to the navy's morale problems and the clash between wardroom and lower deck and Canadian and British naval traditions. The senseless pedantry and haughtiness that had resulted in the Mainguy Report are still said to be in evidence, though not all officers were equally afflicted. Meyer has particular praise for Plomer and Landymore, but Brock is given decidedly mixed reviews and Fraser-Harris gets an enthusiastic thumbs down. Plomer, Meyers reports in a typical passage, "held no illusions that his sailors wished to be copies of Royal Navy seamen," (p. 143) and for that reason enjoyed considerable standing with his men.

There are a number of minor errors and some questionable interpretations here. We are introduced to Ascott [Escott] Reid and A.D.P. Heaney [Heeney], (p.19) for example, and find buried in a rather marginal footnote Ambrose E. Burnside [George B. McClellan] commanding the Union forces at Antietam during the American Civil War. (p.233) The segments on the land war in Korea are drawn almost exclusively from U.S. works published in the 1950s, so it comes as no surprise to find repeated references to the Chinese "swarms" and "hordes" that repulsed MacArthur's rash

advances. There is also a superfluous chapter-length jeremiad on the calamitous effects of armed forces unification.

More serious are the author's difficulties in clearly presenting the point of view of his subjects, the ordinary seamen. Most of the work consists surprisingly of purely operational accounts of ships' movements, not information on the daily routines of Canadian sailors. These are highlighted by numerous and often lengthy anecdotes but even their contribution to Meyers' subject is far from clear. True, the cases usually involve the men of the lower deck (which admittedly contributes something towards our understanding of their military lives), but this is not to say that they faithfully represent their point of view. For example, on matters of naval discipline, Meyers relies heavily on the ships' official records, but if one is interested in point of view, whose is this?

Complicating the matter is Meyers' decision to write in the third person and to studiously avoid the type of direct personal recollections contained in Curry's work. There is nothing inherently wrong with this tactic provided the author is consistent in attributing information to its source, but when primary and secondary documents are interwoven with anecdote, opinion and recollection, and the whole remains woefully short of proper citations, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell where personal experience ends and other forms of evidence begin. It is never clear, for example, how many of the incidents described on *Cayuga* the author actually witnessed. He lauds the RCN's superb shell-to-kill ratio, but what is the source of the evidence? (p.126) And whose impression of American troops is being recounted when they are described as having grown "fat and undisciplined" while stationed in Japan? (p.20)

Having introduced the question of point of view, it is incumbent upon Meyers to articulate it fully. By choosing the vehicle of scholarly apparatus and primary documentation, it is crucial to execute it in a particular, even restrictive, fashion. This does not preclude the judicious use of recollection or anecdote, or necessitate a comprehensive recounting of Canada's Korean involvement, but unsupported accusations regarding Royal Navy planning

(p.61) or MacArthur's competency (p. 109) are difficult to accept in a book whose title suggests a far more structured tome. The problem here is that Meyers has endeavoured to write two books at once, one a history of the RCN in Korea derived mainly from primary documents, the other a history of the war from the perspective of ordinary seamen, derived from a much broader array of sources. As presented, neither works especially well, although *Thunder in the Morning Calm* does have its moments.

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