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# The RCAF and the Creation of an RCN Air Arm A Study of the Command and Control of Maritime Air Assets

Richard Goette

As the international situation continued to deteriorate during the summer of 1939, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) had to think seriously about how it would fight a war against Germany. Since the threat to Canada from German bombers was relatively low, the air force came to realize that the principal responsibility for its organization on the east coast, Eastern Air Command, would be maritime defence and that this required intimate cooperation with the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN).<sup>1</sup> Realizing just how important the assistance given to the navy was, the Air Officer Commanding Eastern Air Command, Group Captain N.R. Anderson, stressed that it was absolutely vital that Eastern Air Command's Maritime Patrol Squadrons do an adequate job of assisting the navy by providing air coverage for convoys. "Otherwise," he warned, "through lack of the necessary cooperation an attempt may be made by the Navy at some future date to develop their own Air Arm as had been done in the United Kingdom and the U.S.A."<sup>2</sup>

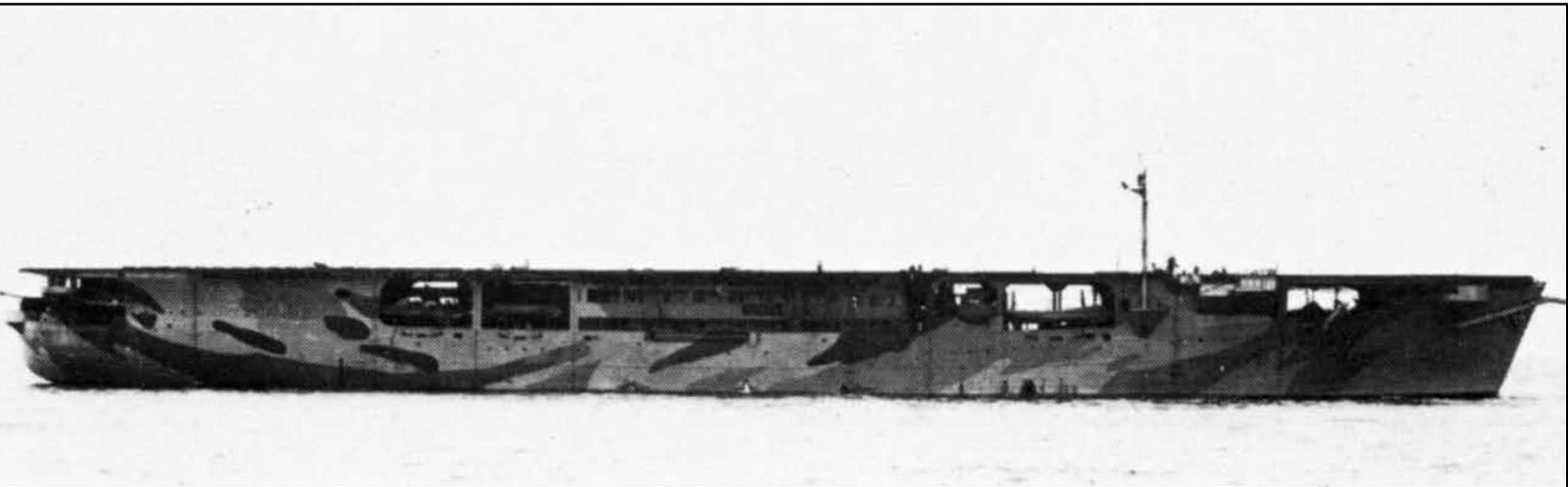
Indeed, military aviation for use over the sea had seen a different development in Canada than it did in Britain or the United States. These latter countries had developed both *maritime* air forces, that is, aircraft under the command of the country's respective air forces, as well as *naval* air services, which are aircraft under the command of the navy and which operate largely from aircraft carriers.

In Canada, though, the development of military aviation was focused on the growth of a maritime air force only. Although the last few days of the First World War had seen the creation of the navy's Royal Canadian Naval Air Service, the war ended before its aircraft could be put into operation on the east coast, and this naval air element was soon lost in the budget cuts of the immediate post-war Canadian Government.<sup>3</sup> Instead, responsibility for air coverage over water in Canada fell to the Canadian Air Force, which later became the Royal Canadian Air Force. As a result, by late 1939, maritime air duties on Canada's east coast fell to the Royal Canadian Air Force's Eastern Air Command.

During the war, the Germans operated their submarines, known as U-boats, at night and in groups called "wolf packs" against Allied convoys, and they did so with much success.<sup>4</sup> As shipping losses continued to rise throughout 1941 and 1942, the Western Allies began to explore options on how to stem German U-boat attacks. They all agreed on the need for more air coverage for convoys. Aircraft were one of the key weapons employed by the Allies in the war against the U-boats. Indeed, a U-boat could not surface in the presence of an enemy aircraft for fear of it either alerting nearby naval vessels to its presence or being attacked with air-launched weapons.<sup>5</sup> Air coverage for the defence of convoys could either be in the form of shore-based aircraft,

commanded by the air force, or aircraft from naval vessels in the form of small escort carriers. These vessels were merchant ships fitted with a flight deck and re-commissioned as auxiliary aircraft carriers. They played a multitude of roles, of which perhaps the most important was to accompany Allied convoys on their voyages across the North Atlantic.

the first escort carrier, HMS *Audacity*. This Royal Navy vessel commenced operations in the defence of convoys in the autumn of 1941. Almost immediately she demonstrated her value in the defence of shipping. While providing protection for a convoy to Gibraltar, *Audacity's* aircraft fought off German aircraft and also reported and attacked four U-boats that had been shadowing



HMS *Audacity*, a Royal Navy escort carrier, proved the value of such a ship in defending convoys. However, the vessel also displayed the vulnerability of such a high-value target.

Escort carriers could stay with the convoy at all times and provide immediate air coverage for a great span of time. The air force's shore-based aircraft did not share this advantage due to their need to travel between their base and the convoy. This meant a limited number of hours when they could operate around a convoy. The inclusion of escort carriers in a convoy also allowed Western Approaches Command in Britain to route shipping directly, thereby shortening the voyage, instead of having it go out of its way to seek the safety of shore-based air cover.

Escort carriers also had their disadvantages. Navigational difficulties encountered by ship-borne aircraft operating in the cruel North Atlantic risked "the possibility of high losses through pilots being unable to return to their ships." Other drawbacks included the high cost of maintaining carriers and their vulnerability to submarine attack thereby requiring additional ships tasked specifically to protect the carrier instead of conducting anti-submarine duties.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, such vulnerability was made all the more apparent by the short wartime career of

the convoy.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, as a vessel operating with a convoy, *Audacity* was also a ripe target for the German submarines, and she was subsequently sunk by a U-boat only a couple of days after she had so effectively driven off the first attack of German submarines.<sup>8</sup> It was with these issues in mind that the idea for a Royal Canadian Navy air arm developed.

One of the first individuals to spur serious thinking on the establishment of an RCN Air Arm to man escort carriers for convoy defence was Commander C. Thompson of the Royal Navy. In September 1942, Thompson, who was the captain of the escort destroyer HMS *Witherington*, circulated a very critical report on air coverage provided by Eastern Air Command. Stating that the current efforts by the RCAF organization left "much to be desired," Thompson argued that "experience during this war fully confirms that air operations over the sea are far more efficiently carried out by Naval Officers who have received air training than by Air Force Officers who are posted for duty in naval co-operation squadrons."<sup>9</sup> One of Thompson's main

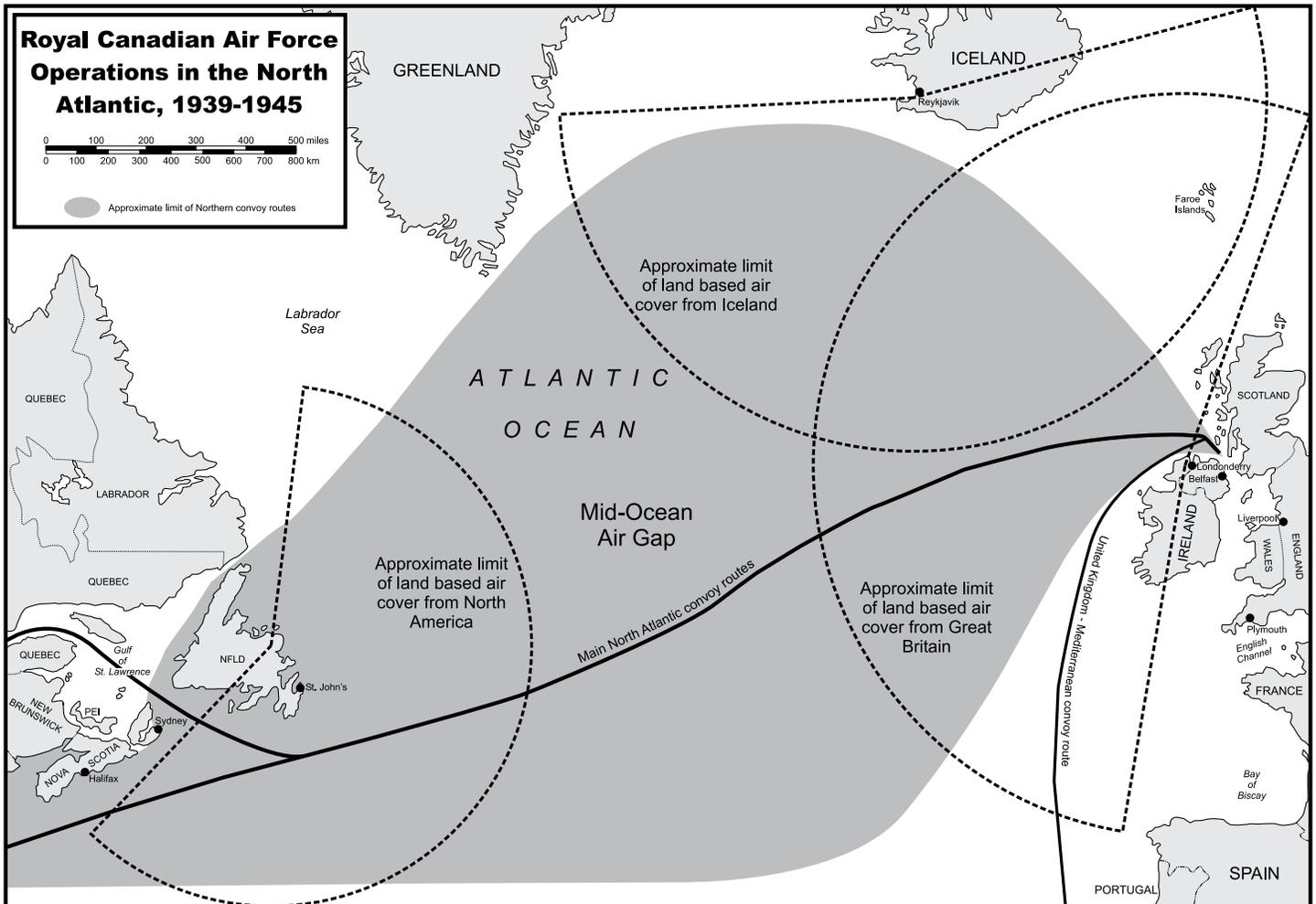
recommendations was that in order for maritime air operations in Canada to be successful, “there needs to be naval influence from top to bottom.” He stressed that it simply was not enough for the Navy to have operational control or direction at the operational headquarters level because it did not ensure competency at the tactical level, and he therefore suggested that “there must be Naval Officers in the aircraft.”<sup>10</sup>

What Thompson did not appreciate was that having Naval observers in aircraft would have a limited effect on the efficiency of Eastern

**Right:** As Air Officer Commanding the RCAF’s Eastern Air Command in 1939, Group Captain N.R. Anderson (seen here as an Air Commodore later in the war) warned his superiors about the possibility of a navy attempt to wrestle responsibility for convoy air defence from the RCAF if the air force did not carry out this role efficiently.

**Below:** The Air Gap, also known as the “Black Pit,” consisted of a giant hole in the air cover over the main trade routes between Britain and North America that stretched 300 miles across from east to west and 600 miles north to south from Greenland and the Azores Islands. It was here where U-boats conducted their surface operations against convoys without fear of aerial attack.

Canadian Forces Photo Unit (CFPU) PL1181, courtesy of the Shearwater Aviation Museum.



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2004



With additional fuel tanks for added endurance, Very-Long-Range Liberators were the best Maritime Patrol aircraft utilized by the RAF and RCAF for convoy air coverage in the Mid-Atlantic.

Air Command operations. At this point in time, command of the aircraft was vested entirely in the pilot with the result that the observer, who was often more capable of making a correct tactical decision, was left without any executive responsibility.<sup>11</sup> Thompson's ideal solution was that a Royal Canadian Navy Air Service be created to fulfill the role of providing air coverage for convoys. He did, however, concede that it was not desirable that the navy should completely take over the RCAF's maritime patrol squadrons for the time being. "After all," he noted, "we are aiming at co-operation between the Services, and this [taking over the air force's squadrons] will take it to the extreme."<sup>12</sup>

Thompson's report met with much resentment from both the RCAF and members from the staff of the Royal Air Force's (RAF) maritime air organization, Coastal Command. Commander P.B. Martineau, who was a Royal Navy (RN) officer on the staff of Coastal Command, was dismayed with Thompson's suggestions, and stated that "he was dead against the report."<sup>13</sup> The Air Officer Commanding Eastern Air Command, by now Air Vice-Marshal A.A.L. Cuffe, went further, stressing that "as far as control of the air force's Anti-Submarine operations is concerned, this seems to be purely a matter of close cooperation – so long as that cooperation works smoothly, is there any need for complete naval control?"<sup>14</sup> Thus,

at a joint meeting between air force and naval officers at Eastern Air Command Headquarters in Halifax, it was not surprising that the attendees decided against implementing Thompson's version of increased naval command and control over and input into the air force's maritime air operations.<sup>15</sup>

The RCN did, however, take Thompson's recommendation for a Naval Air Arm to heart, as several officers in Naval Service Headquarters had for a while been desiring to secure an air element for their service. One of the main problems of the air force's Eastern Air Command was that it did not have aircraft with sufficient range to patrol long distances effectively. The result of this dilemma was that an "Air Gap" existed in the mid-Atlantic, where U-boats operated free from fear of Allied aircraft. Although the air force tried to close the Air Gap by securing Very-Long-Range B-24 Liberator aircraft, the navy sought to solve the problem by securing aircraft carriers for its mid-ocean escort groups. The problem was that the navy had virtually no officers with experience in carrier operations – only two regular force officers had any carrier experience, and neither had dealt with air operations.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, in April 1943, the Naval Staff tasked the navy's Director of Operations Division, Acting Captain Horatio Nelson Lay, to go on a fact-finding tour in the United States and Britain to examine the elements required for and the possibility of the RCN securing its own Air Arm.<sup>17</sup>

Shortly thereafter, on 13 May 1943, the Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Percy W. Nelles, raised the question of establishing an Air Arm at a meeting of the Cabinet War Committee. This immediately drew a guarded response from the Minister of National Defence for Air, Charles G. "Chubby" Power. The minister, protective of the air force's jurisdiction over air matters, "observed that a very important question of policy was involved." He feared that the creation of such a new Naval Air Arm would be a drain on the already strained British Commonwealth Air Training Plan resources, and that it "would mean two separate air forces in Canada, with consequent duplication organizations for headquarters, supply, repairs, and the rest." Furthermore, Power stressed such duplication would also be "more costly in terms of manpower, money and materials than development within the RCAF to meet limited Canadian Naval requirements."<sup>18</sup>

Echoing Power's concern over the financial implications, the Minister of Finance, J.L. Isley, argued against the duplication that separate air forces for each service would entail. Isley instead advocated for the continuation of the current system of the "provision of air protection of convoys by co-operation between the navy and air force." Finally, the Minister of National Defence, Colonel J.L. Ralston "expressed doubt as to whether Canada should assume any further commitments which made further calls upon Canadian manpower." The result was that the

An RAF Coastal Command VLR Liberator.





NAC PA 204259

In 1943, Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa tasked Acting Captain Horatio Nelson Lay (seen here, middle, in 1940 as a Lieutenant-Commander with fellow RCN officers H.G. DeWolf and J.C.H. Hibbard) to travel to Britain and the United States on a fact-finding tour to examine the possibilities of the RCN having its own Air Arm.

Cabinet War Committee deferred decision on the issue until Lay had completed his report.<sup>19</sup>

The RCAF was not alone in being concerned about the command and control implications of a Naval Air Arm. The RCN itself, understanding that “in the final analysis it is the RCAF that have the say in all matters affecting the air,” feared that the air force would both “do all in its power to prevent the division of air authority” and attempt to dictate “the operation of the aircraft, the supply of personnel, the maintenance of the aircraft, supply of aircraft and all the other factors involved.” At the strategic level, the navy, understanding that the importance of the escort carrier operating in convoy escort groups was growing, feared that if Canada did not secure carriers, it would mean “a gradual decline both in the RCN’s strength as an escort service and in the strength of its strategic control and relations with the Navies of the UK and the US.”<sup>20</sup> The navy memo continued on, stressing that “only can actual experience in the operations of such vessels entitle a Naval Service to voice an opinion on their operations.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the RCN hoped

that Captain Lay’s report would put to rest some of their anxieties.

Lay submitted this long-awaited report on 27 August 1943. His first recommendation was that “a Royal Canadian Naval Air Service (RCNAS) be established as soon as possible.” Lay also recommended that “the RCNAS should be manned by Naval personnel and under the direct administrative and operational control of the RCN.”<sup>22</sup> This recommendation was based on Lay’s lack of faith in the concept of co-operation. He argued that “co-operation between the two services cannot be as efficient as single control by one service” and he gave the example of the years of inter-service infighting between Britain’s Royal Air Force and Royal Navy over the control of the Fleet Air Arm in the interwar period as a reason for complete naval control over a Canadian Naval Air Service.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Lay also recommended that “the Naval Air Service should concern itself with carrier operations only” and not with maritime air operations. Such operations, he stressed, should remain with the RCAF. Lay’s reasoning for this contention was his



**Above:** Captain Horatio Nelson Lay would later go on to command the Royal Navy escort carrier HMS *Nabob*, which was largely manned by Canadians except for the flight personnel, who were British. While conducting operations off in the Barents Sea in August 1944, *Nabob* was heavily damaged by a torpedo from the German submarine *U-354*.

**Below:** HMCS *Warrior*, the RCN's first light fleet aircraft carrier, was commissioned into the navy shortly after the war. She carried Seafire and Firefly aircraft from the RCN's 803 and 825 Squadrons.



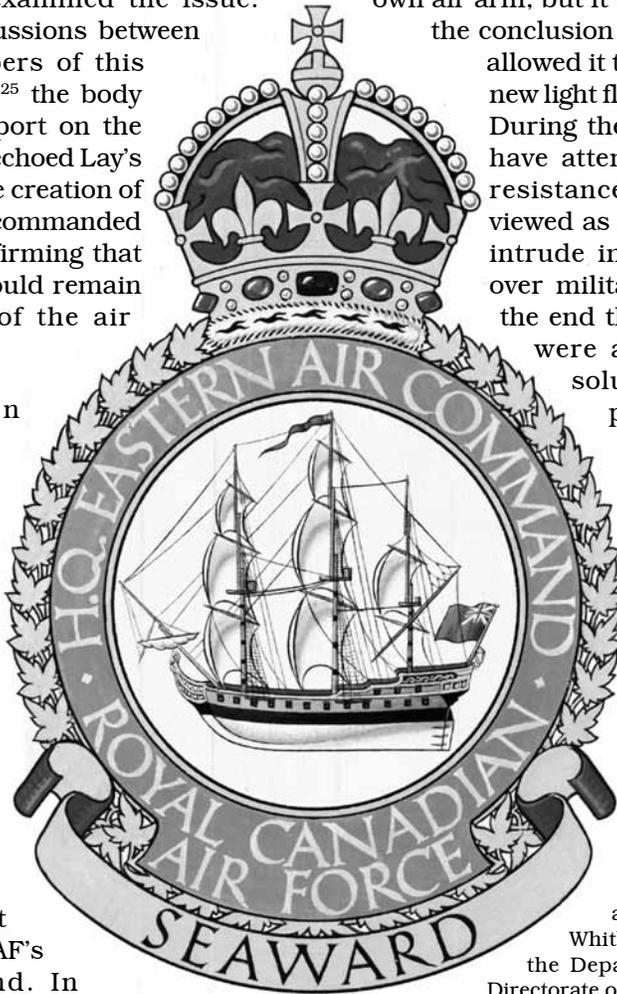
well-founded belief that “in Canada the RCAF is well established in Coastal operations and it is considered that it would be more efficient not to disturb this organization.”<sup>24</sup>

Because Lay’s report contained no air force input, the Cabinet War Committee deferred making a decision on it until a joint air force-navy Committee had examined the issue. After some heated discussions between RCAF and RCN members of this joint service committee,<sup>25</sup> the body finally submitted its report on the 12th of October 1943. It echoed Lay’s findings by calling for the creation of a Naval Air Service to be commanded by the navy and by confirming that shore-based aircraft should remain under the command of the air force.<sup>26</sup>

Former Canadian naval aviator Stewart Soward has questioned this arrangement over maritime air assets. He called it “highly dubious” and noted that “it is remarkable that no explanation was ever given to justify the decision.”<sup>27</sup> Such a contention, however, overlooks the part of Lay’s report that explained that it would not be efficient to disturb the current organization of the RCAF’s Eastern Air Command. In short, the navy did not favour the transfer of Eastern Air Command’s Maritime Patrol squadrons to the Naval Air Service because it understood that to make wholesale changes in the middle of a very important campaign against a deadly enemy risked an administrative chaos that could potentially cost them final victory in the Battle of the Atlantic. This was a sound decision that was in fact made on precedent. In late 1940, Britain’s Royal Navy had attempted to secure command over the Royal Air Force’s maritime air organization, Coastal Command. However, the British War Cabinet blocked the

navy’s efforts, concluding that to undergo such changes in the middle of a war would not be a sound decision.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the Royal Canadian Navy did not secure command over the air force’s maritime air squadrons along with a naval air arm in 1943.

In the end, the RCN was able to form its own air arm, but it was not until shortly after the conclusion of the war that resources allowed it to operate aircraft from its new light fleet carrier, HMCS *Warrior*. During the war, the air force could have attempted to put up greater resistance in what it might have viewed as an attempt by the navy to intrude into air force jurisdiction over military aviation. However, in the end the two Canadian services were able to come up with a solution that satisfied both parties: an air arm for the RCN and the continued operation of Maritime Patrol squadrons by the RCAF.



## Notes

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1. W.A.B. Douglas, *The Creation of a National Air Force: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force Volume II* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and the Department of National Defence, 1986), p.378.
2. Anderson to Breadner, 23 August 1939, Directorate of History and Heritage [hereafter DHH], Department of National Defence file 181.009 (D4979).
3. See Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders, 1880-1918* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), p.280 and S.F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War: The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force Volume I* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in co-operation with the Department of National Defence and the Canadian

- Government Publishing Centre, Supply and Services Canada, 1980), pp.602-608.
4. For the development of U-boat "wolf pack" tactics, see Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz, *Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days*, R.H. Stevens, transl. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), Chapter 18.
  5. John Buckley, *The RAF and Trade Defence, 1919-1945: Constant Endeavour*, (Keele, U.K.: Ryburn Publishing, Keele University Press, 1995), pp.123-124.
  6. Horatio Nelson Lay, *Memoirs of a Mariner*, p.149; William Chalmers, *Max Horton and the Western Approaches: a biography of Admiral Sir Max Horton* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954); Report by Professor P.M.S. Blackett, "The Value of Escort Vessels and Aircraft in Anti-Submarine Warfare," 11 January 1943, [British] Cabinet Anti-Submarine Warfare Committee, Public Records Office [hereafter PRO], London, Cabinet File [heafter CAB] 86/3; Memorandum by G/C Costello, Senior Air Staff Officer, 14 September 1942, National Archives of Canada [hereafter NAC], Record Group [hereafter RG] 24, Vol. 5177, S. 15-1-350, Part 1.
  7. Bernard Fitzsimons, ed., *Warships of the Second World War* (Anstey, U.K.: Marshall Cavendish USA Ltd., 1973), p.6. The convoy's naval escorts eventually finished off some of the attacking U-boats.
  8. *The Battle of the Atlantic: The Official Account of the Fight Against The U-boats 1939-1945* (London: HMSO, 1946), pp.37-38.
  9. Commander C. Thompson, RN, "The Necessity for Naval Pilots and Observers in the Royal Canadian Air Force Squadrons Employed in Naval Co-Operation Duties," 25 September 1942, PRO, Air Ministry File [hereafter Air] 15/217.
  10. *Ibid.* According to RCN Captain Horatio Nelson Lay, Thompson had "considerable experience in the Royal Navy, as a Staff Officer in the Mediterranean Fleet during all the important carrier actions, and as an Escort Commander in the Western Local Escort Force." Memorandum to VCNS, CNS, and Minister of National Defence for Naval Services from Acting Captain Horatio Nelson Lay, 11 January 1943, NAC RG 24, Vol. 83-84/167, Box 575, file 1700-913, Part 1.
  11. DHH 79/599, D.V. Peyton-Ward, *The RAF in the Maritime War, Volume I: The Atlantic and Home Waters: The Prelude, April 1918-September 1939* (RAF Air Historical Branch Narrative), nd, p.196.
  12. Commander C. Thompson, RN, "The Necessity for Naval Pilots and Observers in the Royal Canadian Air Force Squadrons Employed in Naval Co-Operation Duties," 25 September 1942, Air 15/217.
  13. Report by Commander P.B. Martineau, RN, on Visit to Eastern Air Command, 31 October 1942, Air 15/217.
  14. Minute by Cuffe in the margin of Thompson's report, nd, DHH 79/184. Emphasis in original.
  15. Cuffe to Minister of National Defence for Air, C.G. Power, 20 November 1942, DHH 79/184.
  16. Memorandum to VCNS, CNS, and Minister of National Defence for Naval Services from Acting Captain Horatio Nelson Lay, 11 January 1943, NAC RG 24, Vol. 83-84/167, Box 575, file 1700-913, Part 1.
  17. J.D.F. Kealy and E.C. Russel, *A History of Canadian Naval Aviation, 1918-1962* (Ottawa: The Naval Historical Section, Canadian Forces Headquarters, Department of National Defence, 1965), p.22. See also Michael Shawn Cafferky, "Towards the Balanced Fleet: A History of the Royal Canadian Naval Air Service, 1943-1945," Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Victoria, 1987.
  18. Minutes of the 235th Meeting of the Cabinet War Committee, NAC RG 2, 7c, Vol. 12, microfilm reel C-4875.
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. "Aircraft Carriers as Part of [the] RCN," Memorandum Prepared by Lieutenant-Commander J.S. Stead, Senior Officer (Air), 4 May 1943, NAC RG 24, Vol. 83-84/167, Box 575, file 1700-913, Part 1.
  21. *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
  22. Report on the Formation of a Royal Canadian Naval Air Service With Covering Submission by A/Captain H.N. Lay, RCN, 27 August 1943, p. 32, NAC RG 24, Vol. 83-84/167, Box 575, file 1700-913, Part 1.
  23. *Ibid.*, 17; See also DHH 79/599, Peyton-Ward, I, *The RAF in the Maritime War, Volume I*, pp.141-150 & 199-205, and Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars, Volume II: The Period of Reluctant Rearmament, 1930-1939* (London: Collins, 1976), pp.401-413 for information on the "Inskip Inquiry," which led to the eventual placement of the Fleet Air Arm under the full command of the Admiralty.
  24. Report on the Formation of a Royal Canadian Naval Air Service With Covering Submission by A/Captain H.N. Lay, RCN, 27 August 1943, pp. 32-33, NAC RG 24, Vol. 83-84/167, Box 575, file 1700-913, Part 1.
  25. Cafferky, "Towards a Balanced Fleet," p.118. See also Lay, *Memoirs of a Mariner*.
  26. Cabinet War Committee Document No. 633, "Joint Royal Canadian Navy-Royal Canadian Air Force Committee on the Acquisition and Operation of Aircraft Carriers by the Royal Canadian Navy (Report by Special Committee)," 12 October 1943 and Minutes of the 265th Meeting of the Cabinet War Committee, 21 October 1943, NAC RG 2, 7c, Volume 14, microfilm reel C-4875.
  27. Stewart Soward, "Canadian Naval Aviation, 1915-69," in James A. Boutillier, ed., *RCN in Retrospect, 1910-1968* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 1982), pp.273-274.
  28. See Richard Evan Goette, "The Struggle for a Joint Command and Control System in the Northwest Atlantic Theatre of Operations: A Study of the RCAF and RCN Trade Defence Efforts During the Battle of the Atlantic," (Unpublished M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 2002), Chapter 3.

Richard Goette is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. His dissertation will explore continental defence command and control issues between Canada and the United States during the Cold War.