

**NO HIGHER PURPOSE:
THE OFFICIAL OPERATIONAL
HISTORY OF THE ROYAL
CANADIAN NAVY IN THE
SECOND WORLD WAR,
1939-1943. VOLUME II, PART I.**

by **W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty
and Michael Whitby**

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Reviewed by
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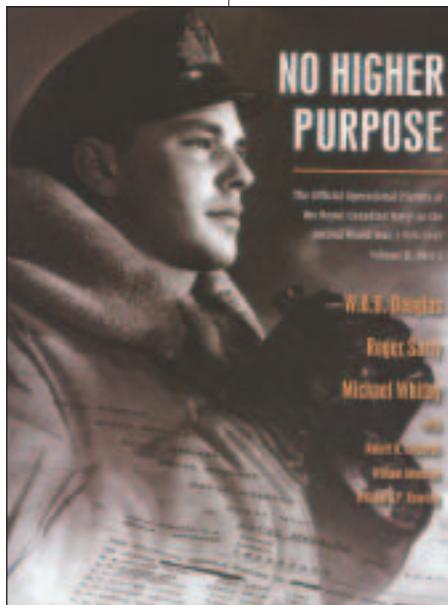
For fifty years, the official history of the Royal Canadian Navy has consisted of Gilbert Tucker's two volume set *The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History* (1952) and Joseph Schull's *Far Distant Ships* (1950). Tucker's first volume dealt with the origins and early years of the RCN, while the second volume covered activities on shore during the Second World War. Tucker had planned a third volume, an operational history of the RCN in the Second World War, but believed that writing this history required access to Allied and German records and classified intelligence files. Research for this volume was "truncated as a result of deep reductions in the budget for the Department of National Defence following the Second World War" (p. xvii). Joseph Schull's *Far Distant Ships* was conceived as the nominal third volume to Tucker's work to ensure that the Canadian war at sea did not go unnoticed. However, *Far Distant Ships* was based on anecdotal interviews and preliminary records. Therefore, while it is described as an "Official Account of Canadian Naval Operations in World War II," it has always been recognized as lacking the rigour and accuracy necessary for a true operational history.

Work began on a naval history project in 1986 that was intended to produce the third volume of Tucker's official history – the operational history of the RCN in the Second World War. The Department of National Defence approved a single, new volume of naval history "that would focus on Second World War operations as well as summarize new findings concerning the development of Canadian maritime forces from the time of Confederation" (p.xvii). By 1990, however, it was realized that so much material existed that a different approach was required. Approval was obtained for the production of two additional volumes. Three volumes of a revised official history of the RCN are now planned. One will deal more fully with events prior to

1939. One will cover the operational history of the Second World War. The third will look at the events from 1945 until 1968 and unification of the three services. So much material was available for the operational history that it was necessary to break it into two parts. Volume Two, Part One is the current work, *No Higher Purpose (NHP)*. Part Two, *A Blue Water Navy*, will be published later.

No Higher Purpose covers the period from the outbreak of war in 1939 until the creation of the Canadian North-West Atlantic Command in mid-1943. *A Blue Water Navy*, will concentrate on the events until V-J Day. The two volumes, therefore, have a chronological organization but it is made clear that this order is not absolute and there is some overlap and discontinuity of material. The introduction of *NHP* states, for example, that the account of the RCN's participation in the Dieppe Raid, Operation "Jubilee", although occurring in 1942, is found in Part Two. Further, it is made clear that while "wherever British ships operated throughout the Second World War, Canadian sailors served," these two volumes do not "study the hundreds of young Canadians, volunteer and regular, who served in the ships of the Royal Navy" (p. xviii). Therefore, for example, no account would be expected of the 29th or 65th Canadian Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) Flotillas, as these were units of the Royal Navy (RN) manned by Canadians. While the authors of this official history admit that the service of Canadians with the RN is integral to Canadian naval heritage, these volumes are specifically about the development and operations of a distinct Canadian Navy. As the authors succinctly put it, these volumes are the story of those who changed the Canadian Navy. *NHP* clearly and thoroughly sets out the beginning of this story.

NHP is divided into two sections. Section 1, "Evolving a Role," deals with events from September 1939, involving the planning and mobilization of the RCN at the outbreak of the war, through to December 1941 when the second convoy agreement for transoceanic convoys was implemented. This section also includes a brief, but good, summary of the creation of the RCN and its status in the period leading up to the Second World War. Section 2, "Crisis and Response," deals with events from January 1942 until the creation of the Canadian North-West Atlantic Command in mid-1943. This section deals primarily with events in the Atlantic, but also includes a chapter "The Pacific Coast and Alaska, December 1941 to July 1943." As Canadian west coast naval activities are often largely ignored or treated in a very cursory manner, this chapter is



most welcome. It contains a range of interesting material about lesser known subjects. These include the west coast activities of the Prince-class Armed Merchant Cruisers, the formation and employment of the Fishermen's Reserve and the establishment of the combined operations facility in British Columbia to counter any attempted Japanese landings on the West Coast. The RCN's contributions to operations in cooperation with the United States Navy (USN) against Japanese lodgements in the Aleutian Islands receives detailed treatment in this chapter. It highlights the difficulty Canada and the RCN had in reconciling widespread commitments with a paucity of forces, as well as the difficulty of being a junior alliance partner.

No Higher Purpose charts the beginning of the development of an ocean-going Canadian Navy from one which, at the outset of the war, was a small, ill-trained, ill-equipped, navy of about 2,000 personnel and six ships. At that time, the RCN saw its role as either operating independently in local defence of Canada or as part of an RN fleet. It was thought that because of its almost complete dependence on the RN for training, equipment and doctrine, the RCN would be quite unprepared to fight the type of war that the Battle of the Atlantic would become in short order. To fight the Battle of the Atlantic, the RCN would have to expand into a large, professional, ocean-going navy capable of operating independently, but in cooperation with the RN and USN, to protect Allied convoys against German U-Boats. As the book shows, this created three separate, but inter-related, problems for the RCN. It would have to undergo a very large and rapid expansion. It would have to become technically and operationally competent to be able to conduct operations against a well-handled, skilled, and aggressive German U-Boat force. And, it would have to learn how to function as an important, but junior partner in an alliance with the RN and the USN.

At the outset of the war, the British Admiralty, as in the First World War, requested operational control of RCN units for service in British waters. The book shows how Mackenzie-King's rejection of this, in a seemingly insignificant assertion of Canadian autonomy, dramatically affected the RCN's dealings with the RN and later the USN. The RCN, therefore, initially focused on the role of local defence. As the U-Boat war expanded and shifted, however, the demand for convoy escort grew. RN resources were stretched to the limit, and each new crisis brought pressure to bear on the RCN to accept increasing commitments. There is an honest assessment that the RCN, in the early war period, had a tendency to overestimate its capabilities, and thus overreach itself. It is pointed out that many early decisions had a long-term negative impact on the RCN's operational efficiency. Two in particular that *NHP* highlights were the decision to man and outfit corvettes that were originally built in Canada for the RN, and a similar decision to man a number of ex-USN destroyers that had been passed to the RN as result of the US/UK bases-for-destroyers agreement. In both cases, the RN was unable to man these ships, and the

Admiralty prevailed upon the RCN to do so to bolster the number of escort hulls that could be put to sea. The RCN saw this as an opportunity to expand rapidly, and to be able to shoulder a greater burden in the war. However, the RCN's limited capabilities were stretched to the breaking point, and these decisions exacerbated the already difficult condition of rapid expansion, creating a significant training and experience problem that persisted well into 1943.

Thus, as *NHP* shows, despite evident limitations, by mid-1941 the RCN had agreed to participation in full transoceanic convoys. With this, the RCN assumed responsibility for and command of the Newfoundland Escort Force under Commodore L.W. Murray, and RCN ships were escorting convoys well into the Eastern Atlantic. However, as the book suggests, acceptance of these increased responsibilities came at a heavy price in operational efficiency. *NHP* notes that by late 1942 there was rising discontent in the RN over the RCN's poor operational record and lack of experience and tactical acumen. *NHP* frankly discusses the RCN's failure to achieve a satisfactory level of operational efficiency by late 1942 into early 1943 – the beginning of the crucial period of the Battle of the Atlantic – and illustrates this with descriptions of several convoy actions.

Despite the obvious faults in RCN operational efficiency, *NHP* provides a convincing argument that it was questionable whether the RCN could have done any better, given the state of training and experience of the RCN ships and the fact that they were escorting the slow convoys. In addition, the German *B-Dienst* had broken Allied codes and a large number of submarines could be concentrated against the convoys. Also, the Allies had lost Ultra intelligence in this period. As well, *NHP* argues that a full review of the record, such as that for convoy ON 115 (pp. 504-5), now reveals that many of the actions, judged at the time to be ill-advised or reckless stemming from lack of training and experience, can now be seen to have been very effective. Nevertheless, *NHP* agrees that it was correct to withdraw the RCN from the Atlantic in early 1943 for a period of operational training and maintenance.

While *NHP* is frank in admitting that much of the operational deficiencies of the RCN were self-inflicted, it is equally frank in examining the problematic nature of the relationship between the RCN and the two senior partners – the RN and the USN – that also affected RCN operational efficiency. Since the USN entered the war through the back door by protecting England-bound US commercial shipping as far as Iceland, the RN and the USN had to come to new command-and-control arrangements for convoys in the Atlantic. *NHP* shows that the USN's major concern at this point in time was to preserve its own operational authority and to avoid a repeat of its First World War experience where the US fleet was brought under RN operational control. Chapter 3, "The RCN and the Anglo-American Alliance, January to July 1941," illustrates how the USN refused to

permit the RCN direct participation in these discussion, believing this would give the RN's position too much weight. Thus, the RCN was always on the periphery of these negotiations, even though it was significantly affected by them.

As a result, by late summer 1941, the RCN came under full USN operational control as negotiated by the British Admiralty. With both the RN and the USN attempting to reconcile operational commitments and responsibilities, the RCN became caught in the middle. The RCN was seen as providing the forces for Atlantic convoy escort by both the RN and USN, thus giving them their needed operational flexibility. As *NHP* clearly shows, however, because the RCN was not directly involved in these discussions, the potential for confusion was high. A case in point was the disorder that arose over the number of escorts the RCN would be able to provide for the Newfoundland Mid-Ocean Escort Force. Pressed by both the RN and the USN to come up with more escorts than they could supply comfortably, the RCN raised the warning that the large effort could only be sustained by the RCN at the expense of continued efficiency. The warning proved to be true, but was largely ignored until the height of the Battle of the Atlantic in early 1943.

The RCN, as the junior partner in the Alliance, opted, for the most part, to fulfil short-term Alliance needs by putting hulls to sea in spite of its own need to bolster its long-term operational abilities. There were, however, two instances when Canadian and RCN needs clearly were put ahead of Alliance needs. Chapter 7, "*Paukenschlag* and the Caribbean", examines the period when German U-Boats began to attack shipping in the Caribbean, putting at risk the vital oil supplies. Britain and the US made an attempt to redistribute tanker hulls to provide for Canadian and British petroleum needs. This was insufficient, however, and the situation was made worse by the USN's refusal to implement a convoy system. Despite considerable pressure not to do so, the RCN implemented convoys for oil tankers between Trinidad and Halifax. The escorts for this task had to come from the Newfoundland Escort Force, and at a time when other RCN escorts were being committed to support Operation "Torch", the invasion of North Africa. While RCN operations in the North Atlantic were arguably weakened as a result of these commitments, not a single ship under RCN protection on the Trinidad-Halifax convoy run was sunk, and RCN ships participating in support of Operation "Torch" performed extremely well.

The second instance of the RCN putting its own needs ahead of the Alliance is examined in Chapter 8, "The Battle of the St. Lawrence, February 1942 to December 1943." While the Halifax-Trinidad convoy runs ostensibly met Alliance needs as well as Canadian ones, dealing with submarines in the St. Lawrence was a singularly Canadian problem – and a highly charged political one at that. Attacks on Canadian merchant ships in Canadian home waters

awakened memories of the U-Boat attacks in the same area in 1918. This caused the RCN to act unilaterally, shifting some of its already thinly-spread assets to deal with this threat. Again there was pressure from the RN and the USN not to do so. At the same time, Mackenzie King, fighting for his political life over the issue of conscription, saw the attacks as guidance from the spirit world (p. 431). He used selective public release of the information about them to bolster the government's case for conscription for home service. He did so despite the results of the April 1942 plebiscite that, except from Quebec, was overwhelmingly in favour of conscription for overseas service.

Chapter 11, "The Creation of the North West-Atlantic Command," explores in detail the creation of the only operational theatre to be commanded by a Canadian during the war. *NHP* shows that although RCN units at sea were suffering operational deficiencies that degraded their performance, the RCN's organizational ability – particularly in Naval Control of Shipping and the collection and dissemination of signals intelligence – was more than adequate. While it took some time to overcome resistance to an increase in the RCN's command responsibilities, *NHP* illustrates that the case was argued forcibly and cogently by senior RCN officers on the basis of the RCN's unwavering commitment to Allied needs and its demonstrated abilities. This chapter also highlights the continuing shift of RCN alignment from the RN to the USN.

No Higher Purpose contains a good mix of historical analysis and detail with narrative description. Sometimes, however, there are abrupt transitions between the two that are disconcerting. There are some factual errors that are annoying and potentially confusing to readers without specialist knowledge. For example, at page 537 it is explained that "American naval officers tried to recast the RCN in their own image." One in particular "tried to interest the Canadians in adopting the USN system of making captains of ships and ships' officers of the executive branch rather than officers of the engineering branch." This indicates that the USN model was to have separate specialist executive or warfare officers and engineer officers. This is not factually accurate. The RCN system, modelled after the RN was to have just such separate specialists. Thus the engineering expertise on many ships was very weak. The USN was proposing the adoption of their system so that all officers would be trained as engineers first. In their opinion, this would have enhanced maintenance of RCN ships. With this in mind then, it makes sense when the passage goes on to comment that this offer was rejected as it would have "necessitated a complete change in the way the RCN manned its ships and developed its officers." As an official history, however, written by numerous authors over an extended period and then merged, some of these types of difficulties are to be expected. None that was noted was sufficient to detract from the overall usefulness of the work.

The book has a good general index, a much-appreciated index of ships' names, and a useful list of abbreviations at the front of the book. This volume also includes five appendices that provide additional information that should be pertinent to both volumes of the history. The book is well supported by pictures and maps or chartlets. Some of the chartlets dealing with convoy actions, however, are very busy and hard to read, particularly for an uninformed reader. Not all of the charts and maps are referred to in the text and, unfortunately, some that are don't appear on the page the text indicates.

NHP is an important book for two reasons. First, it has provided, at last, the official history of the RCN's operations in the Second World War. It puts the Canadian contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic into its proper historical perspective. It makes no apologies for the well-known poor performance of the RCN on Atlantic convoy runs from mid-1941 through December 1942. It shows that the RCN made every effort to meet the need for convoy escorts at critical times – often to the detriment of its own long-term operational efficiency. However, it clearly demonstrates that it proved exceptionally difficult for a young, small, but rapidly-expanding navy with a limited technological and industrial base to grasp, or strike a

balance between, the complex inter-relationships involving men, materials, equipment, experience, expansion, and training.

NHP clearly puts this situation into proper perspective by showing that it wasn't all the RCN's fault. It is also frank, however, in showing that the RCN was caught between the RN and the USN, and that it was exceptionally difficult, as a junior partner, to balance national interest with Alliance interests, resulting in problems for long-term operational efficiency.

No Higher Purpose is also important for a second, much broader, reason. The research that went into developing this operational history has resulted in both a greater understanding of the body of Canadian naval history up until Unification, and the plan to publish a revised history of the RCN. *No Higher Purpose*, and those who have contributed to it, have served a higher purpose of refining and broadening the knowledge of Canadian naval history. No higher purpose has been served and it is very welcome.

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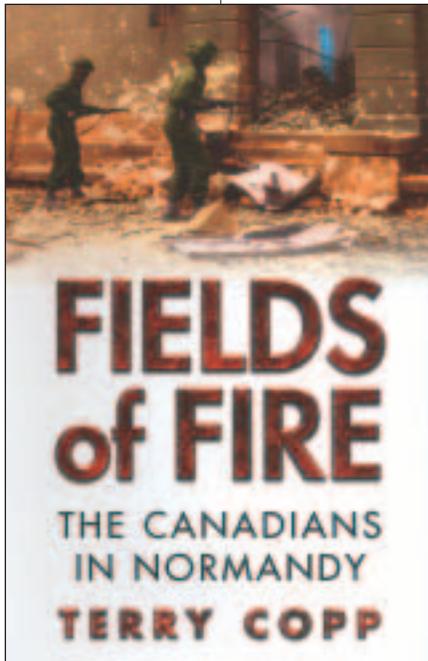
FIELDS OF FIRE: THE CANADIANS IN NORMANDY (THE 1998 JOANNE GOODMAN LECTURES)

by Terry Copp

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 344 pages, \$40.00

Reviewed by Donald E. Graves

In *Fields of Fire*, Terry Copp, a professor at Sir Wilfrid Laurier University, sets out to demonstrate that the prevailing wisdom about the Normandy campaign – that the *Wehrmacht* was superior to its Allied counterparts and was only defeated by superior numbers and materiel – is wrong. Copp believes that the Allied forces performed much better in the summer of 1944 than has been previously acknowledged. Copp suggests that this is particularly true of the Canadians, who the author feels (pp. 13-14) played a role in Normandy “all out of proportion to the numbers of troops engaged” and, though their performance “was far from perfect,” it still compared very favourably with the other Allied armies. This is a very admirable thesis – and a very patriotic one – but it must be proven.



Much of *Fields of Fire* is based on a series of three lectures Copp delivered at the University of Western Ontario in 1998. The topics of these lectures were “Military History without Clausewitz”, Operation “Spring” in July 1944, and Operation “Totalize” in August. The first lecture, which forms the basis of the opening chapter of *Fields of Fire*, is both a review of the historical literature on the 1944 campaign, and an account of the preparation of First Canadian Army for battle.

This literary review is engaging and interesting, but Copp does not devote much space (about seven paragraphs in all) to the two seminal works that must be taken into account when discussing the Canadian Army's performance in Normandy. The first is C.P. Stacey's *The Victory Campaign* (published in 1960, not 1962 as Copp would have it). Stacey was the Army's official historian and Copp implies (pp. 5-6) that Stacey's critical comments about Canadian soldiers in the summer of 1944, which appeared on pp. 274-277 of *The Victory Campaign*, particularly the statement (p. 277) that the Germans “contrived to get more out of their training than we did,” are the genesis of the established wisdom that the Canadian performance in Normandy was not as good as it should have been. In this regard, it is unfortunate that