

## The Royal Canadian Navy and the Cuban Missile Crisis

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In the fall of 1962 the world stood on the brink of nuclear war. The United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a high stakes game of brinkmanship in which the outcome could be the annihilation of half the planet. President Kennedy had quarantined the island nation of Cuba as a response to Soviet nuclear missiles being stationed there. These missiles represented a very real threat to the security of the United States and to the security of the North American continent. For this reason, Canada could not help but become intimately involved with the crisis. Nevertheless, the Canadian reaction to the situation proved troublesome. Hampered by a myriad of political concerns, the Diefenbaker government delayed their support of Kennedy's actions. Consequently, the Canadian military was caught in a difficult position. Longstanding military agreements with the United States military called for the cooperation of both armed forces in the event of a crisis, especially if the security of the continent was threatened. Central to these agreements was the role that the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) should play in such a crisis. However, because the RCN was precluded from any politically driven defence agreements such as the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD), it was in a peculiar position as to its proper response to American military alerts.

Because of the delicate political situation that surrounded the Canadian naval response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, official documents and histories are few and far between. As such, any history of Canadian naval action must rely extensively on first-hand sources such as memoirs and oral testimonies. Because the history of the RCN's involvement in the Cuban missile crisis is largely an "un-official" history, these firsthand accounts provide valuable insights into the role this organization played during those tense weeks in 1962. Accordingly, this paper will explore the role that oral histories can play in constructing the history of the RCN during the

Cuban Missile Crisis. That history, beginning with a discussion of Canadian-American relations, both political and military, will proceed to a discussion of the RCN and its anti-submarine tactics before concluding with a discussion of the crisis. Throughout the essay, the value of oral testimonies will be compared and contrasted to that of the secondary sources. The resulting account of the RCN in the Cuban Missile Crisis will show that the *crisis* was not a typical cold war crisis. Instead, the conflict lay in the fundamental disconnect between the military and the political institution.

### **Canadian-American Relations**

Canadian-American relations were unique in that they operated on many different levels during the early Cold War. The nature of this relationship was summed-up by President Kennedy in a speech to the House of Commons in 1961: "Geography has made us neighbours. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us Allies."<sup>1</sup> Kennedy was speaking to the natural circumstances in which the two countries found themselves. Being the only two countries in North America, Canada and the United States consequently developed numerous bilateral continental defence agreements. These agreements were both informal and formal. In the first case, agreements were informal in that they did not require political consultation. Defence became a joint undertaking, with emphasis on mutual cooperation and understanding. In this situation, the military had a high level of operational authority in which to deploy their forces. The second level of this cooperation consisted of formal defence agreements such as NORAD and NATO. The underpinning context

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Haydon, *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Printco, 1993), 63.

of these agreements was political consultation and sanction. Any and all action taken on behalf of these agreements would be the result of political decision making. Thus the framework for continental defence was a strange mixture of political and military authority.

Bilateral continental defence stemmed from earlier cooperation during the Second World War. The threat posed by the Germans forced Canadian and American planners to develop the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD), an organization that was continued after 1945 owing to the emergence of a Soviet threat. The PJBD was initially a forum for formal political consultation on matters of defence, but after the war a separate non-political identity was established in the form of the Military Cooperation Committee (MCC). The MCC subsequently developed a joint defence plan known as the Basic Security Plan (BSP), created in 1946. The BSP created a basic framework in which the military could maintain a high degree of operational autonomy. The result was that many service-to-service agreements covering joint surveillance, exercises, and other activities were created without political approval. Naturally these initial agreements grew into extensive plans and operations in which both militaries would prepare to act as a single operational entity.<sup>2</sup> Thus by 1962, an extensive continental defence framework had been created that was entirely separate from the political process. It was referred to simply as the CANUS agreement and the RCN operated within this framework.

Retired Rear-Admiral Robert Yanow recalls this structure of bilateral defence. Having been a weapons officer aboard the HMCS *Columbia* during the crisis, Yanow was intimately involved with many aspects of Canadian-American cooperation. For Yanow, “cooperation with

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Haydon, *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Printco, 1993), 70-71.

the US navy was outstanding.”<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the navies allowed the seamless integration of forces, and Yanow remembers fondly the great deal of respect between the two forces.<sup>4</sup> These sentiments are shared by retired Vice-Admiral Nigel Brodeur, who was a weapons officer aboard the HMCS *Kootenay* during the crisis. Brodeur, for example, remembers the extensive training and joint tactical publications that came from the relationship. As a weapons officer, Brodeur was well versed in American rules of engagement and was thoroughly familiar with their tactical capabilities. Retired Rear-Admiral Robert Welland, who was Senior Canadian Commander Afloat during the crisis, agrees. The CANUS agreement, remarked Welland during an interview, was “mutually agreeable” which provided an excellent framework for joint operations.<sup>5</sup>

While the BSP created an informal network of continental defence plans, the signing of the NATO and NORAD agreements added a distinctly political element to Canadian defence policy. The experience of the Second World War and the growth of Soviet military capabilities convinced the Western Allies that an alliance structure was needed to maintain peace and stability. Consequently, in 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty was signed and NATO was formed, and one of its founding principles was a commitment to “consultation before the use of force.”<sup>6</sup> In this same spirit, a new Cold War doctrine of “crisis management” was created. The hope was that collective force, created by political consultation and used as a deterrent, would dissuade any aggressor from his aims, thus avoiding armed conflict. The theme of consultation was

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<sup>3</sup> Yanow Interview, 26:42.

<sup>4</sup> Yanow Interview, 36:55.

<sup>5</sup> Welland Interview, 55:34.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Haydon, *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Printco, 1993), pg 52.

carried on into the negotiations of the NORAD agreement in 1957. For the United States, continental air defense was a necessary step to avoiding another Pearl Harbor. This meant that an effective continental air defence would depend on the ability for “rapid decision-making and the need for early military deployment.”<sup>7</sup> In order to effectively implement this, use of Canadian airspace would be needed as the Soviets were now capable of delivering nuclear bombs via the Canadian Arctic. Consequently, Canadian participation in a joint air defence agreement was essential. However, this threatened a possible infringement on Canadian sovereignty and control of the country’s foreign affairs. Canadian politicians therefore sought to maintain political control over the Canadian military by way of consultation agreements. Thus when the NORAD agreement was negotiated it was under the auspices of political process rather than operational coordination. Consequently, the necessity of NORAD was interpreted in different ways by the political and military establishments: “To the military it was a coordination agreement. To the politicians it was a consultation agreement.”<sup>8</sup> By the outbreak of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Canadian-American military relations were typified by both cooperative military operations and formal political treaties. This created a complicated reality in which policy decisions were made.

### **The Royal Canadian Navy – ASW operations**

The crux of the RCN’s antisubmarine tactics was the “hunter-killer” task groups. These groups were generally made up of approximately five destroyers, and in the case of HMCS *Bonaventure*, an aircraft carrier. The latest Canadian destroyer was the 257, or Restigouche

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Haydon, *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Printco, 1993), pg 53.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pg77.

class. HMCS *Columbia* and HMCS *Kootenay* were both of this class. For Admiral Brodeur, the *Kootenay* had “good endurance, good speed, and good sea-keeping.”<sup>9</sup> However, it was not without its flaws. One major flaw that sticks out for Brodeur was the performance of the forward mounted 3”70 gun. This fully automated gun was so troublesome for its operators, remarked Brodeur during interview, that even now he finds it somewhat “difficult to describe without getting somewhat obscene.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the 257’s gunnery control system was plagued by an unreliable and “capricious” radar.<sup>11</sup> Brodeur attributes these problems to the newly introduced “user-maintainer” concept, which meant that those who operated the 3”70 and gunnery control systems were now expected to maintain it. This was problematic since the level of training that crewman had received was not consistent with the duties normally required of them. The flagship of the Atlantic fleet was the aircraft carrier HMCS *Bonaventure*. At the time of the crisis, it was loaded with 16 Tracker aircraft and seven helicopters. Through this aircraft capacity, the *Bonaventure* was able to search an area of roughly 400 square miles, and Admiral Welland remembers that four new aircraft were sent out every four hours.<sup>12</sup> This could be done continuously for two to three weeks as the RCN deployed its hunter-killer groups against a formidable Soviet submarine force.

In 1962, the Soviet threat during the Cold War had been growing in recent years. By the time of the Crisis, the Soviets had an estimated fleet of around 150 submarines, ranging from the newer “Foxtrot” class to the older “Golf” and “Zulu” classes. Brodeur speaks of the Foxtrot

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<sup>9</sup> Brodeur Interview, 13:35.

<sup>10</sup> Brodeur Interview, 15:10.

<sup>11</sup> Brodeur Interview, 17:00.

<sup>12</sup> Welland Interview, 29:40.

as a “very good conventional diesel electric submarine.”<sup>13</sup> These submarines were quiet, making them increasingly hard to track. Moreover, they were manned by experienced and capable crew. All in all, Yanow concludes, “they were a real opponent,”<sup>14</sup> and Brodeur was quick to point out that in a torpedo shootout with a Soviet submarine, a Canadian destroyer would have lost.<sup>15</sup> The Soviets had also recently equipped their subs with nuclear missiles. These were not as advanced as the American “Nautilus” class missiles, however, as the Soviets still had to surface to fire their missiles. In addition to tracking possible Soviet submarine contacts, the RCN had to worry about Soviet fishing and merchant vessels. These vessels, under civilian guise, would often act as support ships for the Soviet navy by gathering intelligence and refuelling patrolling subs. The threat to the North American eastern seaboard therefore, was very real.

The role of the RCN during the crisis, therefore, consisted almost exclusively of assisting the USN with antisubmarine warfare. The Canadian Atlantic fleet consisted of five escort groups: the 9<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and the aircraft carrier HMCS *Bonaventure*’s group. In conjunction with USN, the fleet was tasked with confronting Soviet submarines and monitoring Soviet fishing fleets and merchant vessels. The two navies, through years of bilateral cooperation, had developed an extensive antisubmarine program which utilized long range surveillance aircraft, sub-hunting escort groups, and underwater sonar systems. Bilateral defence agreements, meanwhile, had produced many documents on joint tactical doctrine. The extensive training that resulted from this produced a very capable ASW navy, and Brodeur believes that the RCN

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<sup>13</sup> Brodeur Interview, 27:40.

<sup>14</sup> Yanow Interview, 20:10.

<sup>15</sup> Brodeur Interview, 33:30.



was “as good as any, perhaps better than most”<sup>16</sup> at implementing this doctrine. An integral part of this doctrine was the role that aircraft played in anti-submarine warfare. Canadian Tracker and ARGUS aircraft worked alongside American Neptune planes to scan massive swaths of the Atlantic. The aircraft would fly out and drop a range of sonar buoys then attempt to track any potential contacts. The ARGUS aircraft were able to do this up to 24 hours at a time. If a contact was found, the information could be relayed to nearby ships. In addition to the ships and aircraft, continental defence plans employed the underwater Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS). These underwater listening posts, primarily positioned near Iceland and Great Britain, would track any Soviet subs and convey the information to waiting “hunter-killer” groups. All in all, the submarine screen deployed by the US and Canadian navies is described by all three sources and much of the existing literature as a formidable defence.

### **1962 – The Cuban Missile Crisis**

On 14 October 1962, an American U2 spy plane flew over Cuba and detected the presence of medium-range nuclear ballistic missiles. The missiles had the capability to strike Washington, DC, Boston, and New York. President Kennedy was informed of the missiles two days later, at which time his circle of advisors, called ExComm, began deliberations and eventually decided to enact a naval quarantine around Cuba. This decision was made without consultation with US allies, who received notification of the quarantine only a few hours before Kennedy’s televised speech of October 22. In Canada, Ambassador Merchant Livingston flew to Ottawa and briefed Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, Minister of National Defence Douglas Harkness, and Secretary of State for External Affairs Howard Green on the situation. Shortly

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<sup>16</sup> Brodeur Interview, 35:28.

thereafter, the US military was put on DEFCON 3 and requested that the Canadian contingent of NORAD to do the same. Diefenbaker, for fear of escalation, refused and the Canadian military remained officially on standby. So begin the Cuban Missile Crisis in Canada.

The political realities of the crisis can be seen to be drastically different from the military demands. Diefenbaker and his cabinet theoretically had the power to determine where and when to use the Canadian military. It was up to the politicians to decide when to put the military on alert. Under the National Defence Act of 1951, the Minister of National Defence (MND) was responsible for the “control and management” of the armed forces,<sup>17</sup> and the minister in turn was responsible to the PM and the cabinet. Thus, when Kennedy’s intentions became known and US military units went to DEFCON 3, Diefenbaker refused to follow suit. From the beginning, Diefenbaker distrusted Kennedy’s motives and refused to give his immediate support. In his speech to the House of Commons following Kennedy’s October 22 address, Diefenbaker stated “our duty is not to fan the flames of fear but to do our part to bring about relief from tensions.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the Prime Minister disapproved of putting the military on alert as he believed doing so would heighten tensions. Instead he favoured bringing the issue to the United Nations in order to “obtain a full and complete understanding of what is taking place in Cuba.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, some felt that the Canadian military needed to fulfill its continental defence commitments and formally be placed on alert. Minister Harkness argued to

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Haydon, *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Printco, 1993), pg 88.

<sup>18</sup> Jocelyn Maynard Ghent, “Canada, the United States, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 48, no. 2 (1979): pg 166.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, Pg 166

this end. Diefenbaker relented only on October 24 after the US military went to DEFCON 2 – the highest degree of alertness short of actual hostilities.

Much criticism has been levelled at Diefenbaker for his actions in the crisis, particularly from the military. From a military standpoint, inaction in the face of immediate danger is unacceptable. Moreover, Diefenbaker's conduct illustrates a fundamental disconnect between the military and their political masters. Admiral Welland posits that Diefenbaker was "completely unprepared to deal with [the Crisis]"<sup>20</sup> and that his decisions during the crisis speak to his misunderstanding of the military realities. It is obvious that he did not appreciate the bilateral defence agreements, and thus did not see the need to mimic the American state of readiness. Furthermore it was his duty Prime Minister to ensure the readiness and proper utilization of the armed forces. That was what he was expected to do as a leader. In Welland's eyes, he failed at this task.

Militarily, the situation was quite different; specifically, the very real naval threat that was growing in the Western and Northern Atlantic. The Soviet submarine threat had been growing since early September and on October 17 and 18 Rear-Admiral Ken Dyer, Maritime Commander Atlantic, met with his American counterparts to discuss the matter. The result of these discussions was an increased state of surveillance and readiness within the RCN. This was considered a routine action within joint defence agreements, and thus required no political approval. However, this was as far as Dyer could go without political direction. When the American forces were elevated to DEFCON 3, Dyer was powerless to do anything. Then on October 23, Minister Harkness—without Diefenbaker's consent—ordered his chiefs of staff "to

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<sup>20</sup> Welland interview, 1:10.

begin planning as if the alert had been declared, but to do so discreetly.”<sup>21</sup> The Navy Chief of Staff, Admiral Rayner, relayed these orders. Dyer complied, increasing surveillance patrols and ordering his fleet to prepare for sea. He also sent Commodore Welland to England to take command of the aircraft carrier *Bonaventure*. However, even this response was not considered adequate as the USN had already begun extensive antisubmarine operations. Under bilateral defence agreements, however, the RCN was responsible for the antisubmarine screen in the northern part of the eastern seaboard. Much to everyone’s dismay, the Atlantic fleet was not able to sail until October 25<sup>th</sup>, some three days after Kennedy had announced the situation to the world. Furthermore, the most important aspect of the Atlantic fleet, HMCS *Bonaventure*, would not reach Halifax until November 2. Nevertheless, the RCN eventually settled in to “long days of ocean surveillance,”<sup>22</sup> and began ASW operations.

While ASW operations during the Cuban Missile Crisis were necessary, they were largely inconclusive. This is the conclusion reached by all of the interviewees. Admiral Yanow recalls that nothing actually happened. On the *Columbia*, not one confirmed sub contact was made. All contacts either turned out to be either a “non-sub” or of the biological variety, such as a whale. Admiral Welland shares this conviction, admitting that there is hardly any evidence to conclude that Soviet Submarines were actively operating around the submarine screen. Welland was well positioned to make this observation, as he was the Senior Canadian Commander Afloat during the crisis. He remarks that the Atlantic command was well aware of the 7-10 subs that were regularly operating in the north Atlantic. None of these, he says, were spotted during the crisis.

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Haydon, *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Printco, 1993), pg 128.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Haydon, *The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered* (Toronto: Canadian Printco, 1993), pg 144.

Welland believes that given the heightened pace of operations, these subs would have been easily detected had they been operating near the submarine screen. The successful deployment of an extensive anti-submarine screen had deterred any Soviet activity. Welland's observation contrasts in stark detail with what is explained in the secondary literature. Tony German, in his book, *The Sea is at Our Gates (1990)*, confirms that there were a total of twenty-nine established submarine contacts.<sup>23</sup> He pulls this data from various military records and personal interviews. The discrepancy between the two views can be explained simply by differing interpretations of events. Welland's theory—which he admits is pure conjecture in the absence of definitive proof—is that Soviet submarines were pulled back by Moscow in order to avoid war. Welland's explanation is given in an attempt to explain what he believes to be relative inaction on the part of the Soviet submarines. German, on the other hand, uses his evidence as justification for the importance the RCN played in the crisis. For him, the fact that so many contacts were established is proof that the RCN played an effective role in the crisis. Each explanation points to the success of the RCN's operations, albeit in different circumstances. While the importance of the RCN in effective continental defence should not be understated, the seriousness of the Soviet submarine threat during the Crisis should not be overstated.

The Royal Canadian Navy during the Cuban Missile crisis can be seen as having fulfilled its commitment to continental defence. The oral histories of the event reflect this statement by recounting in great detail the roles and responsibilities of the RCN during Cold War operations. This can be expected, as the sources are drawn from officers who served aboard ships during the crisis. Their usefulness can then be interrupted and evaluated according to their ability to

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<sup>23</sup> Tony German, *The Sea is at Our Gates (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990)*, pg 271.

explain the inner workings of the naval defence mechanism. That mechanism, built through years of joint operations with the US Navy, was meant to provide an effective and extensive anti-submarine screen in the North Atlantic. While the navy achieved this during the crisis, the oral history reveals that from a Canadian perspective, the immediate conflict was not so much with the Soviets as with the political policy that was supposed to guide the military in times of crisis. Diefenbaker's inaction and his hesitancy to deploy Canadian forces coupled with the relative inactive Soviet threat in the Atlantic suggests this is the case. The oral sources reveal that the RCN did its duty inasmuch as it could in the absence of effective political direction. Diefenbaker had misunderstood the terms of the continental defence agreements, which clearly stipulated the need for Canadian involvement under the circumstances of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Diefenbaker's lack of action perplexed the military, whose commanders understood the bilateral agreements as a seamless system of transnational defence. Therein lay the real conflict of the Cuban Missile Crisis in Canada. The defence agreements, and the subsequent role of the Canadian military in those agreements, were interpreted differently by the military and the politicians. The role of the RCN during the crisis, therefore, serves to highlight this conflict through its operations in the defence of the continent.

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