

# Dodging Icebergs and Talking Policy: HMCS *Montréal*'s 2006 Northern Deployment

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## Introduction

On 12 August 2006 as HMCS *Montréal* was anchored off Iqaluit, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Minister of National Defence Gordon O'Connor made it a priority to go on board as part of the new Prime Minister's first visit to Canada's three territories in the north. After delivering a speech at the Nunavut legislature in Iqaluit where he articulated his government's commitment to the enforcement of Canada's sovereignty in the region, the Prime Minister rode *Montréal*'s Rigid-Hulled Inflatable Boat (RHIB) to the ship and had lunch in the Commanding Officer's cabin with a few of the ship's officers and crew. He also toured the ship's bridge, Operations Room and sickbay, witnessed the formal opening of *Operation Lancaster* with the firing of a 6 lb saluting gun, and spoke briefly with members of the crew as they stood at attention on the flight deck. This visit of the Prime Minister to one of Canada's warships leading a joint military operation in the eastern Arctic signalled not only the Conservative government's support of Canada's naval personnel, but also the kind of priority it placed on what is commonly known as "Arctic sovereignty."

The pristine beauty of Canada's north as seen from the water reaffirms both the majesty and the fragility of the Arctic area. So few Canadians have seen this part of their country, and yet this was the second visit for a number of *Montréal*'s crew to the eastern Arctic. Two years earlier, the ship was part of Exercise Narwhal, a military-led training exercise that brought together sea, land and air elements as well as federal, territorial and municipal levels government departments. The ship acted as a supporting unit for land forces, and the exercise was focused on army training in the north premised on a scenario of land forces having to locate and recover satellite debris on southern Baffin Island after a failed launch of a fictitious satellite. This time, *Montréal* went further north into Lancaster Sound, the eastern extremity of the Northwest Passage, undertaking maritime insertion and



Commanding Officer HMCS *Montréal* talking to local fishermen at Nain, Newfoundland and Labrador, while travelling north for *Operation Lancaster*.

extraction of military and civilian personnel as part of a larger maritime surveillance operation under the command of Joint Task Force North (JTFN). This was a real operation, as opposed to a training exercise, with the intent of proving the operational capability of JTFN, a new entity under Canada Command standing up in February 2006 and replacing Canadian Forces Northern Area (CFNA). The JTFN Commander embarked in *Montréal* for the duration of the operation.

This article is about *Montréal*'s 2006 northern deployment set within the context of greater renewed interest in Arctic sovereignty by the new Conservative government. The unresolved jurisdictional disputes in Canada's north have arguably become more pressing for recent governments because in an era of climate change and globalization continued neglect of Arctic sovereignty may have significant negative consequences for Canada. An emphasis on the Arctic would fit in the post-9/11 environment with the focus on the 'home game' by the Canadian military and specifically the navy.

*Montréal's* month-long deployment to Canada's north from 31 July to 31 August 2006, focused not only on the detailed machinations of *Operation Lancaster* as a joint military endeavour in the Arctic, but also on the ability of a warship to liaise with other government departments, host and educate media personnel on board, and connect with local communities, including the conduct of two vice-regal cruises as the ship carried the Queen's representatives from Newfoundland and Labrador as well as from Nunavut at different times during the deployment. Arguably, *Montréal's* experience is a prime example of the operational and political usefulness of a Canadian warship as it conducts, in this case, Arctic sovereignty patrols under a joint command. At the same time, the ship's deployment illustrates some of the specific challenges of operating a Canadian warship in northern waters but there are arguments to be made that versatility and flexibility, rather than specialization, should drive the navy's future make-up even in the context of the current government's focus on Arctic sovereignty.

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### ***The Issue of Arctic Sovereignty***

Immediately after the election of his minority government on 23 January 2006, Prime Minister Harper used his first news conference to comment specifically on statements made by the US Ambassador to Canada, David Wilkins, on Conservative Party election promises to bolster a military presence in the Canadian Arctic. Harper addressed the classic US position articulated by Wilkins that the Northwest Passage is an international strait by asserting that his government would defend the country's sovereignty in the north, thus highlighting apparent limits to Conservative efforts to bolster Canada-US relations. In this case, the Prime Minister appeared prepared to hold steadfast against American claims and not simply stay the course taken by the previous Liberal government under Paul Martin, and to place even greater weight to what has been a policy area neglected by successive Canadian governments.

The issue of Arctic sovereignty involves a number of unresolved jurisdictional disputes between Canada and its



*Dr. Edna Keeble, on the flight deck of HMCS Montréal during a port visit to Makhovic, Newfoundland and Labrador, while travelling north for Operation Lancaster.*

circumpolar neighbours – the United States, Denmark/Greenland and Russia. Although former Liberal Defence Minister Bill Graham made headlines in July 2005 with a visit to Hans Island, a small barren island off the coast of Ellesmere Island also claimed by Denmark, historical assertions of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic can best be understood within the Canadian-American context. From the voyages of the SS *Manhattan* in 1969 and the USCG *Polar Sea* in 1985 to the (unacknowledged but widely understood) continuous transits of US submarines under Canadian Arctic ice, these American incursions into what Canada considers sovereign territory have led to the sort of public outcry, periodic as it may be, that fuels political responses. Wrapped up in this kind of outcry is a fundamental notion of Canadian identity grounded in the need to differentiate the “true North” from its southern neighbour. This leads to what Rob Huebert has called the “Arctic sovereignty/security false dichotomy” in Canadian thinking first pronounced during the Cold War, where the security threat in the north was (obviously) the Soviet Union but the sovereignty threat was (perplexingly, at least from a military-strategic perspective) the United States.<sup>1</sup> However, this dichotomy, false as it may be, helps to explain the apparent neglect by successive Canadian governments of sovereignty protection in the north because it rests on a strategic framework of military action against Canada's principal ally.

The contemporary context can be seen quite differently. Arguably, what is precipitating the urgency for Canadian government action is both a change in global temperature which is melting polar ice caps, and the anticipated actions of global shipping companies seeking to exploit a new shipping route to save time and money. Two compelling arguments are being presented:

- first, global climate change is causing the average amount of Arctic sea ice to decrease dramati-

cally, thus expanding the ice-free season of the route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through Canada's Arctic archipelago; and

- second, a viable shipping route through the Arctic would result in the saving of thousands of miles to ships having currently to transit the Panama or Suez Canals, or Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope between Europe and Asia.

The problem, or threat, however, is not the United States, but rather the position it holds – shared by European and Asian countries – regarding the status of Arctic *waters* through the Canadian archipelago. Canada's demonstration of control over this area is seen as a necessary step to international recognition of the country's jurisdictional rights to legislate, enforce and adjudicate measures as Canada sees fit. In that way, the Conservative government's position regarding Arctic sovereignty arguably presupposes a strategic framework predicated on globalized environmental and economic changes where the focus is on those who might not abide by Canadian law (e.g., shippers) as opposed to those who might destroy the Canadian state (e.g., enemies).

Some would argue that law enforcement has become a particularly important part of the 'home game' for the Canadian Navy. In the post-9/11 environment, homeland or domestic security has become a central element of new American and Canadian institutional structures, from the creation of an omnibus government department (i.e., the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC)) to the standing up of military commands (i.e., the US Northern Command (NORCOM) and Canada Command). The maintenance of domestic security rests specifically with law enforcement agencies in both countries, but in the waters off the American coast the law enforcement role is undertaken by the US Coast Guard (USCG), thus accounting for why the USCG is part of the DHS except for wartime. The Canadian case is different because not only is the Canadian Coast Guard not an armed service, but the Canadian Navy has historically had both the responsibility and capability to support law enforcement, whether for fisheries patrols, drug smuggling operations or the interception of smugglers dealing in illegal migration. These actions in aid of other government departments were evident before 9/11 but interdepartmental cooperation and coordination have become even more imperative in the post-9/11 era as 'defence' and 'security' have become increasingly blurred.

Not surprisingly the focus has been on terrorist organizations as the primary threat to national interests, but

globalized threats also come from other malevolent groups such as transnational criminal organizations as well as apparently benign actors like multinational corporations in the form of, for example, international shipping companies. Canada wants to have the authority to inspect, regulate and generally ensure that ships proceeding through the Northwest Passage meet Canadian safety standards in the same way that the St. Lawrence Seaway Authority carries out inspections prior to ships transiting through the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway system. Littoral waters are littered with wrecked ships belonging to shippers trying to maximize profit margins



HMCS Montréal closing the coast near Nuuk, Greenland, where she stopped for fuel.

by minimizing operating and maintenance costs. Even a Canadian warship operates under stricter safety and environmental regulations in the north than it would in other parts of the world. In the future, given the potential of regular international shipping through the Northwest Passage and the health of Canada's Arctic at stake, the government may want to apply even stricter – and more expensive – regulations on these profit-oriented corporations.

The point is that global actors like international shipping companies challenge a state's purview over its territory and, as evident in global environmental changes outside of the control of governments, these challenges also come in the form of '(hu)man vs nature.' The terrorist attacks on the United States forced Western governments to pay greater attention to their domestic front. The 'home game' has meant that states can no longer take for granted the sanctity of their borders. We can place Arctic sovereignty operations within the context of this globalized framework that has come to even greater



Photo: Pte Darcy Lefebvre, Formation Imaging Atlantic

HMCS *Goose Bay* launching her RHIB in Navy Board Inlet.

prominence in the post-9/11 era. Although anti-terrorism efforts are clearly not the governing rationale for such operations, these operations are part of the 'home game' and the navy's contributions have become central to Canadian presence in the north.

### ***HMCS Montréal's Northern Deployment***

The month-long deployment of *Montréal* to Canada's north exemplified in many ways the versatility of the Canadian Navy and the multiplicity of tasks that could be successfully executed by a warship, oftentimes concurrently. *Montréal* deployed without a full crew complement, including the absence of a helicopter and air detachment, thus allowing bunk space and flexibility in the movement of both military and civilian personnel over the course of the trip. The movement of personnel turned out to be an important factor because *Montréal's* program was illustrative of Arctic sovereignty not simply in terms of maritime surveillance in a joint context, but also of naval support to other government departments and of connections with local and national communities, both directly by the ship's company and indirectly through the media. Not only did the JTFN Commander stay in *Montréal* during *Operation Lancaster*, but at various points the ship also hosted fellow military personnel in the army, air force and Canadian Rangers as well as people from the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC), Parks Canada and a number of media outlets, both print and electronic. As well, His Honour the Honourable Edward Roberts, Lieutenant-Governor of Newfoundland and Labrador, was on board from 4-7 August, followed by Her Honour the Honourable Ann Hanson, Commissioner of Nunavut, from 13-17 August.

*Montréal's* deployment supported broad mission objectives centred on the establishment of a joint military presence in the eastern Canadian Arctic under the com-

mand of JTFN in order to assert Canadian sovereignty. *Operation Lancaster* formally took place from 12-22 August, and with the decision by the JTFN Commander, Colonel Christine Whitecross, to remain in *Montréal*, the ship became the command and control headquarters for the entire joint sovereignty operation. The Commanding Officer of *Montréal* not only acted as the Maritime Component Commander (MCC) and directed the two maritime coastal defence vessels (MCDVs), HMCS *Goose Bay* and HMCS *Moncton*, sailing with *Montréal* as part of the operation, but also ensured that his ship's staff and resources were deployed to aid the JTFN Commander in her planning and execution of the entire operation. The three ships patrolled Canadian waters as part of the sovereignty mission, and were central to the joint operation which involved the insertion and extraction of soldiers from the Royal 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment along with Canadian Rangers at three observation posts, one on both sides of the northern entrance to the Navy Board Inlet and the third on the north side of Lancaster Sound near Cape Home west of Dundas Harbour.

Although different scenarios involved the use of military air assets, namely Twin Otter planes and Griffon helicopters, to insert and extract land elements, ultimately this was accomplished by maritime forces. The three warships landed the soldiers on 17 August. In order to facilitate further interdepartmental cooperation, the Canadian Coast Guard became involved in the extraction of forces on 20 August and CCG *Henry Larsen* extracted the infantry in the two observation posts at the Navy Board Inlet entrance. *Montréal* removed the forces from the post on the north side of Lancaster Sound. The 'jointness' of the operation was clearly evident with the different uniforms (navy, air force, army and Canadian Rangers) on board *Montréal*.

However, military personnel were not the only people embarked and disembarked throughout the operation,

nor was the operation strictly a military endeavour. As part of *Operation Lancaster* the ship's mission included facilitating interdepartmental cooperation, exposing the media to the military, and interacting with local communities. *Montréal* accommodated a number of civilians from both other government departments and the media while participating in different *Operation Connection* activities ashore. Two specific examples of interdepartmental cooperation involved the CCG and the RCMP. In terms of cooperation with the former, not only did CCG *Henry Larsen* extract land forces from two observation posts as mentioned earlier, but it also acted as the vessel of interest in a naval boarding party exercise undertaken by *Montréal* on 20 August. Exercising in Lancaster Sound with the Coast Guard, *Montréal* hailed *Larsen*, fired 'warning shots' both from 50 cal and 57 mm guns, and boarded *Larsen* in two waves of the ship's boarding party in order to secure the vessel by taking control of the bridge, crew and machinery control room.

As well, *Montréal* fuelled from CCG *Terry Fox* on 19 August in Dundas Harbour as had *Goose Bay* and *Moncton* a day earlier. That same day, *Montréal* also supported the RCMP's grave restoration project at Dundas Harbour on Devon Island, the largest uninhabited island in the world, directly north of Baffin Island across Lancaster Sound. Two RCMP officers were specifically on board *Montréal* to lead a contingent of military and civilian personnel, including the media, to restore two RCMP graves from the early 1920s when, historically, early concerns about the threat to Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic archipelago resulted in the establishment of an RCMP detachment. The symbolic importance of the grave restoration project to an Arctic sovereignty operation was one that both military and civilian personnel clearly understood.

*Montréal's* crew also participated in a number of *Operation Connection* activities ashore. *Operation Connection* was launched by Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier in February 2006 as part of a general recruiting strategy for the Canadian Forces by encouraging individual military members to reach out and connect with communities throughout Canada, and in the process the strategy also facilitates the military's understanding and appreciation of local communities – the very people and places that the Canadian Forces protect. Nowhere is this truer than in Canada's north. As *Montréal's* crew participated in activities in Iqaluit and Pond Inlet to encourage greater Inuit representation in the military, they also witnessed first-hand the socio-economic challenges faced



HMCS *Montréal* refueling from CCGS *Terry Fox*.

by Canada's northern communities. Sustainable development and economic renewal are crucial to the future of Canada's Arctic region.

Arctic sovereignty protection is far from being solely a military endeavour, and it is not a task that only governments undertake. It is not enough to simply ensure cooperation between government departments, be they at the federal, territorial or municipal levels, because Arctic sovereignty protection requires buy-in from local communities and, in that way, *Montréal's* presence in the north was not merely directed toward foreign entities but also toward Canada's own Arctic communities. In short, *Montréal's* northern deployment was a success at many levels, accomplishing both military and non-military objectives.

### Concluding Thoughts

Although *Montréal* accomplished her objectives, she faced some real challenges while operating in the Arctic. First, as the title suggests, she had her fair share of icebergs of which to steer clear. With limited ice strengthening, *Montréal's* hull could not withstand a collision with even a moderately-sized iceberg, and even the much smaller 'bergie bits' would have done serious damage to the finely machined propeller blades. Second, fuel management was another concern. With traditional fuelling stops far to the south, *Montréal* had to take extraordinary action to add fuel capacity in the pre-deployment phase, to pay extra attention to fuel conservation while conducting operations and, indeed, to rely on a non-traditional method of extending her range by taking fuel while alongside the anchored CCG *Terry Fox* in Lancaster Sound. And, third, landing the infantry for Observation Post #2 on a rocky beach on Baffin Island with small breaking waves proved to be a particular challenge for *Montréal's* RHIB crew, requiring exceptional boatmanship and ingenuity to complete the mission safely.

But while these were challenges unique to the Arctic, they were not uniquely challenging to a warship. Thus, although navigating near ice in the Arctic required special attention and care, it took no more attention and care than to navigate around fishing fleets with extended nets in the shallow waters around Nova Scotia. Although fuel consumption and availability was an issue in the Arctic, so too is it an issue while transiting the Pacific Ocean en route to operations in Asia. And while landing army personnel on a rocky beach is challenging and dangerous, similar risks are encountered by navy RHIBs during search and rescue operations in rough seas.

The navy mitigates these challenges by adapting watch rotations for lookouts and radar operators, by pre-planning fuelling opportunities or sailing in company with a replenishment ship, and by training RHIB crews to a high skill level and encouraging and rewarding initiative and ingenuity. Indeed, the challenges faced by *Montréal* did not demonstrate the need for specialized warships in the Canadian Navy; rather it demonstrated the inherent capability and flexibility of the current fleet, even for limited operations in Canada's Arctic.

What is important for the Canadian government is to understand and articulate national interests in the Northwest Passage region. The government does not want to use limited resources to claim sovereignty just for reasons of national pride nor does it want to restrict arbitrarily access to international shippers who might profit from the use of the strait in the future. Rather, the government wants to ensure that the fragile ecology of the region is maintained in harmony with globalized commerce over time. Practically speaking this means that Canada's national interests are to have the international community recognize that Canada's right to regulate, not restrict, the passage of vessels through the Northwest Passage is in keeping with international interests, in the same way as Canada's ability to regulate, in cooperation with the United States, the passage of ships through the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway system serves the broader community.

Setting navigation system and hull construction safety standards, controlling the discharge of liquid and solid waste, and perhaps requiring the embarkation of pilots or the accompaniment of ice-breakers for a portion of the transit are all measures that further both Canadian and international interests and goals. If the government understands national interests in the Arctic in this manner, it becomes clear that it should not take the navy on a tangent and redirect limited resources toward specialized naval vessels for the Arctic environment. To the ex-



Photo: Pie Darcy Lefebvre, Formation Imaging Atlantic

Members of the Royal Canadian Regiment disembark from *Montréal's* RHIB after an exercise ashore.

tent that the government wants replacement ships to be able to operate in the Arctic, "ice strengthening makes sense," as argued by Peter Haydon, "but there is certainly no need to send a warship there when waters are frozen."<sup>2</sup> There are numerous categories of strengthening above *Montréal's* Type E hull, a classification dictating the specific times that the ship is allowed to operate in the Arctic region, which the Canadian government might want to consider.<sup>3</sup> In that way, the government would meet its objective of Arctic sovereignty protection while ensuring that the Canadian Navy retain its composition of capable, versatile, flexible ships designed to operate in defence of Canadian national interests at home and worldwide. 🇨🇦

#### Notes

1. Rob Huebert, "Renaissance in Canadian Arctic Security," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Winter 2005-2006), p. 21.
2. Peter T. Haydon, "Editorial: The Naval Procurement Predicament," *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 2006), p. 4.
3. Our thanks to Lt (N) Jack Macdonald, Engineering Officer of HMCS *Montréal*, for providing us the specific information that classifies different types of ships. *Montréal's* Type E hull is the least reinforced for ice, but there are different categories of hull-strengthening (up to Type A) before getting into the 10 Arctic Class categories.

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