



## “Free Flowing” Strategic Discussion

by Darrin Antler

On 24 June, on the Bridge at the top of Juno Tower, Canadian Forces Base Halifax played host to a cadre of sailors, soldiers and air personnel of all ranks and occupations for a very interesting "Free Flowing Strategic Discussion." The event was organised by the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia in collaboration with the Base Commander, Captain(N) Angus Topshee. What was special about this particular discussion was its format. Unlike traditional town hall or lecture settings, the discussion was conducted in the framework of an interesting thought experiment. Attendees were separated into small work groups with mixed representation of service, occupation, rank and background along with one senior participant at each table from the RUSI(NS) Security Affairs Committee. The thought experiment was set as follows:

The Canadian government has acquired two Mistral-class amphibious ships from the government of France, originally intended for Russia, with delivery to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) to take place on 21 October 2015 (Niobe Day). Given that outside of this one time acquisition there are no other variations or alterations to the budgetary situation, and given the realities of today's Canadian society:

1. What would this mean to the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Canada at large?
2. Is this a good thing?

After an hour of open discussion in groups answering the two questions, each group had the opportunity to present their findings.

In the case of the meaning of such an acquisition there were many considerations brought to bear, primarily along the lines of cost, logistics, training, operations, resource management, foreign policy and diplomacy.

The cost consideration was front and centre. Under the parameters of the scenario, after acquisition there would be no additional funding (at least within the current fiscal year under the current legislature). It was revealed by one of the RUSI(NS) participants that based on previous evaluations of an amphibious capability, derived from a joint exercise with the United States a few years ago, the operation and maintenance budget of a vessel of the magnitude of the Mistral-class would be almost equal to our current defense budget. It was acknowledged that the RCN and the CAF have a long history of materiel adaptability and "doing more with less," therefore it is likely that the RCN would be able to shave some dollars off of those costs. Additionally, the delivery would be late in the year, mitigating the annual cost with an opportunity for increased funding in the next federal budget.



Captain(N) Topshee, Base Commander, and Ken Hoffer of RUSI(NS) at a group table during the “Free Flowing” Strategic Discussion. *Photo: Colin Darlington, RUSI(NS)*

From the logistics perspective, manning and materiel and whether the CAF is in a position to provide either was of prime consideration. Attrition is a known problem within the RCN and CAF. Even with the payings off of three ships this year (HMC Ships *Iroquois*, *Protecteur*, and *Algonquin*) and the manning billets those payings off have freed up, there are still fleet wide manning issues with a broad estimate, made by some officers who participated, that the RCN is only at 75-80 percent of required manning. To drive the point home it was mentioned that it is a difficult task to find a mere 40 sailors to man the Orca-class training craft in Esquimalt. On the materiel side of the equation, there would likely have to be a "Canadianization" of the platforms as they were built abroad for another navy. This would require a co-ordination across all departments manning the vessel to have an acquisition plan for parts and other materiel under such a "Canadianization." Also an engineering challenge arises from the electrical distribution system as Europe uses a different end user standard, meaning that North American electrical plugs cannot be inserted into European electrical outlets without adapters. Obviously, this is an untenable situation and would have to be addressed.

Training is one of the CAF's, and by extension, the RCN's, greatest strengths. In a sea-going environment, situational awareness, attention to detail, and reflexive action moulded by repetitive training with muscle memory development is essential to ensure that all a ship's company responds as expected and performs to incredibly high standards. The evolution of the training programs owes a great deal to the valuable input that only comes with experience. On a brand new platform the learning curve would be immense as the benefit of platform-specific experience is now moot. Additionally, the training of the various technicians and maintainers within the RCN and at Fleet Maintenance Facilities would have to be initiated from scratch. This would be an immense investment in time and effort which would likely require cross training with the builder's navy and support staff. The timeline to arrange such training agreements seems tenuous at best. Further, given the new amphibious capability there would have to be an inter-service strategy as it pertains to sea training for sailors, helicopter operations and beach landings for both infantry and armored elements, which would require a suitable location to take full advantage of the operational capabilities the amphibious ships would provide.

Operationally, there is no doubt that adding such vessels to the fleet would significantly extend Canada's capabilities - at sea, in air and on land. A Mistral's capacity for armored vehicles, aircraft and troops is unequalled in the RCN. Canada would now have a reliable transport vehicle for all elements outside of our transport aircraft or the dependence on allies. Obviously, the first operational extension that the CAF would receive would be the ability to make amphibious landings in a hot zone, while the platform can provide a truly joint and integrated command and control centre. The modular potential of the Mistral also would allow for a greater diversity in operational configurations as the ship can be configured for a great many tasks. Humanitarian relief and rescue operations would be bolstered by the ability to coordinate medical facilities on deck in addition to the additional space to provide temporary quarters to those affected by disasters. The ships could also be used to extend Canada's intelligence capabilities as there is a lot of space to set up and configure large scale radio and communications infrastructure in addition to providing a launch platform for unmanned reconnaissance vehicles. However, there would be a danger in extending Canada's capabilities to such a degree with little time to prepare. It was noted that there may be a danger that Canada's "centre of gravity" may change if the RCN were to take on these vessels. Related to such a prospect would be the spectre of "mission creep." Historically, Canada has made peacekeeping and multilateral actions the preferred military policy. Would an amphibious capability of this magnitude change that historical position?

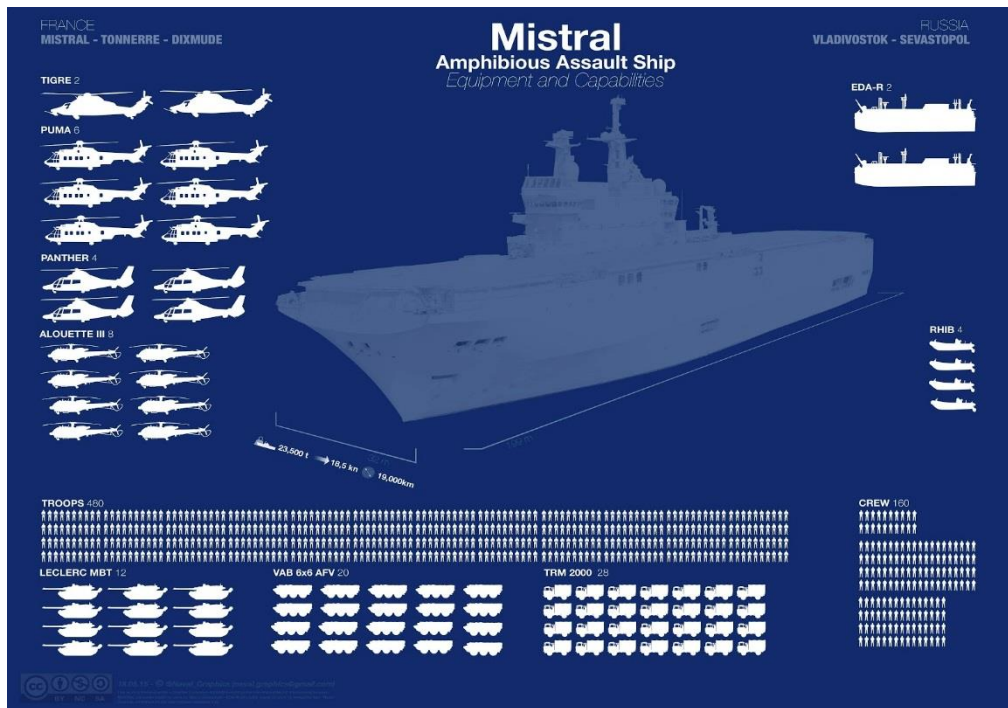


Image: @NavalGraphics

The final point of consideration had to do with foreign policy and diplomacy. Under the parameters of the scenario, Canada would be taking delivery of two vessels already purchased by Russia. The reason that the vessels have not been delivered is because of NATO's sanctions on Russia due to their actions in Ukraine. With these points in mind, how would the Russian government look at such a transaction? Vladimir Putin has made it explicitly clear in the past weeks that if Sweden were to move closer to NATO than they already have, then Russia would consider that a provocation and would consider military action. If Canada were to receive ships intended for Russia, would that be taken as a

provocation as well? If so, does that mean that Canada would have to return to a Cold War posture to counteract potential Russian incursions into our sovereign territory both by air and by sea? And further, can the CAF handle such demands in this day and age?

The second question to the thought experiment addressed whether or not such a procurement would be good for the RCN, CAF, and Canada. The consensus answer seemed to be “yes” but with caveats. A modern amphibious vessel would provide Canada with an international presence and a set of operational capabilities never before seen in this nation. The modular potential of the vessels would give joint operations a versatility that would be incredibly advantageous in the age of unconventional warfare as Canada would be able to provide an independent and modern command and control platform that has been lacking for decades. After a series of setbacks and failing vessels in the past two years, a new vessel would also be a big morale boost to the RCN and could provide a repurposing of the Navy’s role into the future. But as mentioned, the caveats are many: cost, manning, materiel, logistics, mission creep, foreign relations and other points of concern would all have to be carefully considered and planned around in order to make a Mistral-class vessel anything but an albatross around the neck of the RCN and the Canadian people. In these tough economic times, it seems those caveats may be too overwhelming at this point.

Although there was no unanimity reached during the thought experiment, there was one item that all who participated could agree on: the event was a very stimulating and positive experience. The open and inclusive nature allowed for a valuable sharing of ideas and perspectives from CAF members who represented a wide array experiences, backgrounds, and points of view. There was mention during the event that RUSI(NS) and Captain(N) Topshee may be looking to schedule more of these free-flowing discussions, and that is definitely a very good idea for the future of the RCN.

Darrin Antler is a serving member of the Royal Canadian Navy of the Canadian Armed Forces. This work is the sole opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Canadian Armed Forces, the Canadian Department of National Defence or the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia. The author may be contacted by email at:  
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