



DISPATCHES

Issue 4

April 1999

A GARRISON COUNTRY Newfoundland and Labrador during the Second World War

Peter Neary

When the Second World War began in September 1939, Newfoundland was being administered by a "Commission of Government." Under this constitutional arrangement, there was a governor and six commissioners, all appointed by the United Kingdom. By law, three of the commissioners were British and three were Newfoundlanders. Each commissioner was responsible for a portfolio, and the commission as a whole could both make laws and carry them out.

Newfoundland agreed to Commission of Government as a result of the economic catastrophe brought upon the island by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Following the New York Stock Market crash of October 1929, the markets for Newfoundland's main exports – saltfish, pulp and paper and minerals – were severely disrupted, and the country was soon brought to the brink of financial failure. Newfoundland survived with assistance from the United Kingdom and Canada but, in the summer of 1933, faced with unprecedented economic problems at home, Canada decided against any further support for her neighbour. This left the British with a stark choice: accept financial collapse in Newfoundland or pay the full cost of keeping the country solvent. They opted for the latter and the result was Commission

of Government, which took effect on 16 February 1934.

In return for the promise of an annual grant-in-aid from the United Kingdom to balance its books, Newfoundland gave up self-government on the vague understanding that this would be returned on a request from the people, when the country was self-supporting again. The Newfoundland legislature was closed and general elections ceased. According to the 1933 Royal Commission which proposed Commission of Government, Newfoundland needed "a rest from party politics" to become fit for self-government again.

Between 1934 and 1939, the Commission of Government improved the situation but the underlying problem, world-wide depression, resisted solution. The country remained downtrodden and demoralized, something that was perhaps evident in "the lack of cheering and of visible enthusiasm" in the crowds that came out to see King George VI and Queen Elizabeth during their brief visit in June 1939 at the end of their celebrated North American tour.

The coming of war changed Newfoundland's situation with dramatic suddenness. When the British ultimatum to Germany ran out on 3 September 1939, Newfoundland, unlike Canada, was

at war along with the mother country. There was no functioning parliament in St. John's and, as in 1914, the British declaration of war automatically brought Newfoundland into the conflict. For its part, the Commission hurriedly brought into operation an apparatus of wartime administration under the terms of an *Act for the Defence of Newfoundland* that had become law on 1 September.

In keeping with a defence plan adopted in 1936, the Commission had decided in the spring of 1939 to create a small home defence force; shortly thereafter, an officer of the Durham Light Infantry had been recruited in the United Kingdom to train it. In October 1939 the Commission of Government passed legislation creating the new unit, known as the Newfoundland Militia. This force, later renamed the Newfoundland Regiment, was supplemented with an Auxiliary Militia or Home Guard.

Much happened quickly in Newfoundland after 3 September, but the contrast with the start of the First World War is nonetheless striking. Like Canada, Newfoundland set out in 1939 to fight a war of limited liability. Newfoundland would be loyal and true, but its role had to match its limited resources. The island would not, as in 1914-1918, pay for a full regiment to go overseas, a course of action that had led to conscription. This time there would be no separate presence overseas and, by implication, no compulsory enlistment. Instead, the country promoted a recruitment policy for overseas service that directed volunteers into the fighting forces of the United Kingdom. Canada, too, eventually recruited in Newfoundland, with the Commission of Government's permission.



Albert Cloutier

(1902-1965)

Born in the United States to Canadian parents, Cloutier received his art education in Montreal. From 1940 to 1943 he was Chief of Graphics for the Department of National War Services responsible for War Posters and Publications. He was appointed an Official War Artist in 1944, and posted to Newfoundland. In 1945 he painted in Goose Bay and Brig Harbour, Labrador. His 75 Brig Harbour works are a unique, and often humorous record of wartime service in isolated and harsh conditions. After the war Cloutier continued his career as a teacher, designer and muralist in Montreal.

Maintenance

While this approach resulted in the creation of specially designated Newfoundland units in both the Royal Artillery and the Royal Air Force, the largest single contingent of Newfoundlanders to go overseas was the Newfoundland Forestry Unit, formed by the Commission in October 1939 at British request. Taking into account service in the Newfoundland Militia, the Forestry Unit and the merchant marine, more than 12,000 Newfoundlanders (the 1945 population, including Labrador, was 321,819) were at one time or another directly or indirectly involved in the war effort.

While facilitating enlistment abroad, as early as 15 September 1939 the Commission pressed on London the view that the defence of Newfoundland was beyond its means. Specifically, the Commission worried about protecting the city of St. John's, the country's transatlantic cable terminals, the iron ore mines at Bell Island, Conception Bay, and the Newfoundland Airport at what in August 1940 became Gander. The airport, and a seaplane base at Botwood, had been built by the United Kingdom and Newfoundland in the late 1930s in the hope of using these sites for scheduled transatlantic air service.

The Commission of Government first proposed to defend the Newfoundland Airport and Botwood

by turning over the facilities to the Royal Canadian Air Force for the duration of the war. London initially rejected this idea, but events soon showed the wisdom of the Commission's stand. In an age of air and submarine warfare, Newfoundland could not defend itself and the United Kingdom could not spare the resources to do the job either. On the other hand, Newfoundland was vital to the defence of Canada and the United States, which both countries acknowledged.

Despite Canada's own difficulties, on 8 September 1939 Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King told the Canadian House of Commons that the "integrity of Newfoundland and Labrador" were "essential to the security of Canada." Henceforth, relations between the two countries would hinge on that vital consideration. Newfoundland depended on Canada, but Canada now also depended on Newfoundland.

Thus was laid the foundation of Newfoundland's wartime economic transformation. In June 1940, following the defeat of France and the German occupation of most of Western Europe, the Commission of Government, with British approval, authorized Canadian forces to help defend Newfoundland's air bases for the duration of the war. The first Canadian force to arrive was a

detachment of maritime patrol bombers that took up station at Newfoundland Airport on 17 June 1940. Canada's military commitment greatly increased in 1941 when German submarines began to cross the Atlantic to attack the large numbers of merchant ships that passed close by Newfoundland on their voyages between Canada and the United States and Great Britain. In addition to reinforcing the bomber squadron at Gander, the Royal Canadian Air Force provided a further squadron of bombers that flew from a new airport Canada built at Torbay (the present St. John's airport).

Although the air patrols over the ocean routes did much to deter the submarines, it was also essential to provide merchant ships with naval escorts. Canada, on behalf of the British Admiralty, built a large naval base in St. John's. Much of the Royal Canadian Navy's growing fleet of anti-submarine warships operated from there, escorting convoys of merchant ships to British waters and back. It was the cargoes of these merchant ships that kept Britain alive and built up Allied forces for the eventual liberation of Europe. In 1942 the historian P.B. Waite was an Able Seaman and asdic [underwater detection equipment] specialist aboard HMCS *Regina*. Here is how he remembers what it was like to

arrive in St. John's aboard that vessel: "I was on asdic duty in the little cubby cabin on the bridge, when suddenly the lookout cried, "Land dead ahead, sir!" There was land alright, and very un-dead it looked. Great grey cliffs towering upward into the snowy murk, the bottoms alive and cruel with the huge seas breaking on them. The Captain had no real idea where we were, other than on the east side of the Avalon somewhere. You know how hard it would have been to find that bottle entrance in such weather. We were about half a mile off. He ordered "Hard-a-starboard!", and seas or no seas, we rolled and twisted slowly around and clawed offshore, where we pitched around all night. We managed to find our way in the next day. There was St. John's itself..." Truly, "Newfyjohn" – naval slang for St. John's – was a beacon of hope and a comforting presence in the lives of thousands of Allied seamen throughout the war.

To fight the war, Britain required combat and transport aircraft of all types. Although transatlantic flying was still dangerous and experimental, there was no option but to attempt it on a large scale; space in merchant ships was urgently needed for food and industrial materials. One of the most dramatic of all Newfoundland wartime moments came on 10 November 1940, when the first

aircraft to be ferried to the United Kingdom from Gander – seven Hudson bombers manufactured in Burbank, California – lifted off and headed out into the night across the Atlantic. The aircraft landed the next morning (Remembrance Day) at Aldergrove, Northern Ireland, and their crew members disembarked wearing poppies. At a single stroke, Newfoundland had become "one of the sally-ports of freedom." Soon swarms of aircraft were making the crossing with Gander's Canadian-administered facilities as the launching point.

Canada also built a massive air base at Goose Bay, Labrador, as an alternative to Gander for transatlantic operations. After a herculean construction effort, this base became operational in late 1941. In 1944, after long and sometimes difficult negotiations, Newfoundland gave Canada a 99-year lease to the Goose Bay site. Three years before, in recognition of its growing interest in Newfoundland, Canada had sent a High Commissioner to St. John's.

The war brought thousands of Canadian men and women to Newfoundland, made the two countries better known to one another, and left behind a fund of goodwill in Canada towards Newfoundland. All across Canada there are veterans who remember vividly and fondly their Newfoundland days. In 1995, one of

them, from Woodstock, Ontario, wrote: "During these months in Conception Bay, I had the pleasure of going up the cliffs many times to Wabana [on Bell Island]. Enjoyed many visits with a good family...I have often thought of...Wabana and also Portugal Cove. They were really the friendliest places.." Such warm sentiments helped make the eventual confederation of the two countries possible and have helped make it work ever since.

Unquestionably, Canada had a long list of achievements in Newfoundland during the Second World War, but the United States spent more money there and, typically, made a stronger impression. The Americans, still neutral, burst onto the scene in September 1940, when the United Kingdom promised the United States base sites for 99 years in a number of its transatlantic territories, including Newfoundland. In return, the British received 50 used American destroyers. However, the base sites in Newfoundland were explicitly given "freely and without consideration." The details of American base rights in Newfoundland were spelled out in the Anglo-American Leased Bases agreement of 27 March 1941. In effect, this agreement made the base sites in Newfoundland and elsewhere extensions of the American homeland itself. This was a very one-

Tom Wood (1913-1997)

Ottawa native Tom Wood studied art with F.H. Varley of the Group of Seven and Franklin Brownell of the Ottawa School of Art. He was an established designer when he entered the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1943 as a service artist. In January 1944, he was appointed an Official War Artist. He depicted scenes from several Atlantic crossings, sketched his experiences in southern England, and recorded his participation in the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944. In 1945 he spent some considerable time painting naval activity in and off Newfoundland as part of a program initiated by the National Gallery of Canada. Wood had an eye for the spectacular, and many of his paintings capture unusual or beautiful elements in his subject matter.

Sailor in Parka, Newfoundland



CWM CN 10608

**Thomas Harold
Beament**
(1898-1985)

Harold Beament was born in Ottawa, and studied at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto under J.W. Beatty, a Canadian First World War artist. He served in the navy at the end of the First World War, and enlisted again in 1939, retiring in 1947 with the rank of commander. Although he painted throughout the Second World War, it was not until 1943 that he was appointed an Official War Artist. He served in the Mediterranean, the North Atlantic, the English Channel and in Newfoundland, and was also present during the D-Day landings. His wide experience as a serving naval officer allowed him to identify scenes in his paintings that often carry a special resonance for those who served.

sided deal in favour of the United States, extracted when the British had little bargaining power. American rights in Newfoundland went far beyond anything ever given to Canada, even at Goose Bay.

The Americans chose properties at St. John's, where they established an army base (Fort Pepperrell) and a dock facility; at Argentia/Marquise, where they built a naval air base and an army base (Fort McAndrew); and at Stephenville, where they built a large airfield (Ernest Harmon Airbase). As allies after December 1941, the Americans were also accommodated at Torbay, Goose Bay and Gander. In keeping with British practice, Newfoundlanders still drove on the left-hand side of the road. On entering an American base, however, the right-hand side rule applied. The U.S. exercised virtual

sovereignty in its areas of local jurisdiction.

Inevitably, the transformation of Newfoundland into "a garrison country" had profound economic, political and social consequences. First and foremost, the war revived the economy and rescued the Newfoundland people from the appalling conditions of the 1930s. Thanks to enlistment for service abroad and the base building boom at home, Newfoundland entered a period of unprecedented prosperity. By 1942, the country not only enjoyed full employment, but was actually making interest-free loans of Canadian dollars to the by-then hard-pressed British. Relatively speaking, Newfoundland was still a backward place in 1945 but it had significantly improved its infrastructure and services in a few short years. The war also enhanced the status of the Commission of Government and the power of the state in Newfoundland.

For generations, Newfoundland had been a society of the native-born; the country had not attracted large numbers of immigrants for a very long time. In fact the opposite was true; for decades people had been leaving Newfoundland for the United States and Canada. The thousands of men and women who came to the island and Labrador during the war – Canadians and Americans – brought with them new energy, new ideas and new ways. By their presence and example they represented a fundamental challenge to the status quo. Newfoundland experienced the shock of the new and emerged from the war a very different place.

Furthermore, the war made political change in Newfoundland unavoidable. The circumstances of the conflict quickly showed the limits of British power in the western Atlantic. London well understood that the revival of the Newfoundland economy, the transfer of military

responsibility to Canada, and the presence of American forces made planning for political change in Newfoundland imperative. After Clement Attlee, the British Deputy Prime Minister, visited Newfoundland in 1942, and a parliamentary mission toured the next year, London promised that at the end of the war in Europe it would provide Newfoundlanders with constitutional machinery whereby they could decide their own political future.

This set the stage for the National Convention that met in St. John's from 1946 to 1948, the two constitutional referenda held in 1948, and the union of Newfoundland with Canada on 31 March 1949. Newfoundland had a long history of connection with Canada, but it was the war and its consequences that made Confederation practical. For Canadians and Newfoundlanders, individually and collectively, the war years constituted a period of mutual discovery that laid the foundation for the common bond of nationhood.

Further reading:

- Carl Christie. *Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command*. University of Toronto Press. 1995.
- Alec Douglas. *The Creation of a National Air Force*. The Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force, vol. 2. Department of National Defence and University of Toronto Press. 1986.
- Alan Easton. *50 North: An Atlantic Battleground*. Ryerson Press. Toronto. 1963.
- Peter Neary. *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World 1929-1949*. McGill-Queen's University Press. 1988.
- Steve Neary. *The Enemy at our Doorstep*. Jespersion Press. St. John's. 1994.
- Bernard Ransom, "Canada's 'Newfyjohn' Tenancy: the Royal Canadian Navy in St. John's 1941-45", *Acadiensis* 23, Spring 1994.

Canadian War Museum
General Motors Court
330 Sussex Drive,
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0M8



www.civilization.ca

For information:
Telephone: 1-819-776-8600;
or 1-800-555-5621

Graphic design by Mike Bechthold <mbechtho@wlu.ca>