Its Own Worst Enemy: Ship Advocacy in the RCN, 1963-1964*

Richard Mayne

Photo: DND/DHH, File 91/487

The General Purpose Frigate Program was first conceived in August 1960 and then cancelled by the Liberals in October 1963.

On 24 October 1963, the Minister of National Defence, Paul Hellyer, announced that he was cancelling the previous government's eight-ship General Purpose Frigate (GPF) Program. This ship had formed the basis of the Royal Canadian Navy's (RCN) force structure planning for over three years, and its termination was a devastating blow. Historians often use the GPF as the seminal event that triggered Hellyer's hostile relationship with the navy's senior staff. New research, however, suggests that internal bickering at the staff level – emanating from advocates who wanted the RCN to acquire either more aircraft carriers or a nuclear submarine program – actually played a significant role in sabotaging the GPF Program.

There were various ship classes – such as destroyers, aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, or even the more exotic hydrofoil – that became 'pet projects' for staff officers who got attached, often emotionally so, to their preferred choice. These advocates actively pushed their concept in an attempt to ensure that the RCN acquired it. Competition between these individuals could be fierce, particularly when the navy faced drastic budget cuts. And that was exactly what happened to the GPF when the Liberal Party took over the government in April 1963.

Expensive social programs promised during the election campaign made extensive reductions to the military's budget inevitable. This created a cutthroat environment among the various advocates which, according to one staff officer's private correspondence, led to a seething and dangerously fragmented naval headquarters throughout 1963 and early 1964. But budgetary reductions were not the only factor that turned the advocates against one another. The government was also re-evaluating Canada's defence policy. Obviously, the roles the

Photo: DND/DHH, 81/520/8000, Box 192, file 13.

*Vice-Admiral H.S. Rayner (seen on the far right cheering at the commissioning of HMCS **Nipigon** on 30 May 1964) never got over the loss of the GPF.*

government saw the navy performing would mean certain ship classes would get emphasized over others.

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In mid-August 1963, Hellyer told the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff, Air Chief Marshal Frank Miller, that he had a particular vision for the Canadian military – what he called Mobile Force. At that time Hellyer gave Miller only a sketchy idea of what this meant, telling him that it "is basically an air transportable fighting unit which could be airlifted with its equipment for quick deployment anywhere in the world."[1] Providing sea lift for this force was not the minister's idea. Instead, advocates within the navy of obtaining aircraft carriers saw this role as an opportunity to use Hellyer's vision to their advantage.

The Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), Vice-Admiral H.S. Rayner, was less than enthusiastic about acquiring ships for a sea lift role. Rayner wanted to build a specialized anti-submarine force of enlarged helicopter-carrying destroyers (DDH) protected by GPFs (the latter would also add a small measure of versatility to the fleet). Worried that Rayner had no intention of replacing the RCN's current carrier, HMCS *Bonaventure*, with another similar vessel, the top naval aviation advocate, Commodore A.B.F. Fraser-Harris, recognized that the Mobile Force concept was his best chance to secure this platform's future. The idea of Mobile Force allowed Fraser-Harris to advance an impressive fleet of carriers consisting of the smaller *Iwo Jimas* (which would carry the troops and helicopters) as well as the larger *Essex*-class that would provide aircraft for area air defence and strike support. His argument was that the aircraft carrier was the only vessel that could contribute to both the limited war Mobile Force and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) roles. In the end, the future composition of the RCN came down to a choice among a destroyer force specializing in ASW, an amphibious fleet centred on the *Iwo Jima*-class ships, or a combination of both.

Photo: DND/DHH, BIOG H

Paul Hellyer, the Liberal Defence Minister, actually had allies within the navy who supported his decision to cancel the GPF.

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Those who supported a destroyer-based navy had some powerful arguments against the *Iwo Jima* and *Essex* plan. The pattern of Canadian peacekeeping missions by now established made it extremely unlikely that Canada would ever get involved in a war situation requiring a serious

Photo: DND/DHH

*With HMCS **Margaree** and three **Prestonian**-class frigates in the foreground, USS **Iwo Jima** arrives for a port visit to Esquimalt, BC, on 4 November 1961. Some officers wanted to make the image of a Canadian **Iwo Jima** rounding Duntze Head a reality.*

level of firepower or sophistication. Only a Korean War type of scenario could justify the *Essex* and *Iwo Jimas* and even a cursory reading of the new Liberal government suggested that it did not want Canadians involved in international conflicts and potential quagmires. That meant Canadian peacekeepers would disembark through unopposed port landings, and according to Rayner the current fleet could easily cope with this type of sea lift.

Rayner had other objections as well. Shopping for expensive carriers made no sense at a time when the government was threatening to drastically reduce the military's budget. How the navy was going to afford both new destroyers and aircraft carriers for limited war and anti-submarine operations was the key question that had yet been asked. For the advocates of destroyers, the answer was simple – the navy could do one task or the other well but not both. Supporting the Mobile Force role would adversely affect the RCN's primary commitment to NATO and for Rayner that led to an awkward scenario. Presumably, a limited war could precipitate heightened global tensions between the superpowers; and there was simply no way that the carrier-borne ASW helicopters could be committed to a search for submarines in the North Atlantic if the *Iwo Jimas* were off attempting to contain a war somewhere else. Moreover, unless the government was willing to pay for this dual-purpose fleet, the navy had few options but to specialize in ASW. Rayner understood this all too well. Advocates of adopting carriers, however, continued to sell their platform on the basis of its ability to contribute to both limited war and ASW operations.

Firm direction was required to help the navy navigate around the differing factions, and that was something Rayner did not provide. The discussion over Mobile Force provided a forum to reopen a capability debate that most thought the GPF had shut. In fairness to Rayner, Mobile Force had put him in a difficult situation. Ignoring the minister's interest in limited wars risked the possibility that the navy would be left behind if Canadian defence policy suddenly shifted in this direction. There was no crystal ball at naval headquarters to say that the current incarnation of Mobile Force would stall at the planning phase, and therefore Rayner had little choice but to hedge his bets. Moreover, challenging a ministerial directive at a time when the government was in the process of cutting budgets was not smart politics. From that perspective, therefore, Rayner did the right thing by forming an ad hoc study group to look into force structure under the chairmanship of Commodore H.G. Burchell.

Burchell was a good choice to head this committee. He was fair and understood the dangers that the growing factionalism in the RCN posed to the navy and its planned programs. As he noted in February 1963:

> It is important that the creditability of programmes approved by requisite authorities in the RCN should not be compromised by loose talk, no matter how sincere the individual and/or his expert views. There is a time to express one's views and when that time is past I do not wish staff to participate in the generation of "red-herrings."[2]

This warning was well founded. If the GPF Program was to have any chance of surviving the government's proposed cuts, it needed the unqualified support of the entire staff organization. Rear-Admiral J.V. Brock had foreseen this. While serving as the Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff he had warned all the advocates in early January 1963 that the decision to build the GPF was final and that changes to the concept would not be tolerated. His message was clear – debate and discussion was welcome while the staff was in the planning stage, but nothing was more likely to scrub an established program than dissension in the ranks. Burchell totally agreed with Brock's approach. In his view "every member equally has a duty

to support the majority situation," and that "once action is underway on an approved project anything less than full support is sabotage."[3] Yet this was exactly what some elements within the navy were doing to the GPF.

Hellyer's memoirs suggest that fears of being tied down by what he saw as an ill-conceived Conservative government program made the decision to cancel the GPF a relatively easy one. New evidence, however, shows that the minister had second thoughts. One of his key advisors, R.J. Sutherland, wrote a powerful report on the GPF concept arguing that it was the best platform to meet the RCN's needs.[4] While this gave the minister a moment of pause, it was Rayner's defence of the program that led Hellyer to reconsider. Indeed, the CNS made a good case. Canada's allies were asking the RCN to provide more escorts rather than carriers, and to sweeten the deal the CNS was willing to cut the program in half. That appeared to have had the biggest impact on Hellyer. Apparently Hellyer felt he ought to cut back on the program but politically this was difficult to do. Shifting defence dollars to social programs would make it difficult to keep the GPF alive, but Rayner's four-ship program meant that it was no longer impossible.

The story of how an embittered ex-naval officer named James Plomer publicly attacked the GPF as "a wasteful navy program" in both the media and a parliamentary committee is a well-told tale. What is less known, however, is that there were some advocates of nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers who were willing to take advantage of the chaos created by Plomer's charges to push their own agendas. In particular, Commander E. Gigg, who was perhaps the most vocal advocate of nuclear submarines, saw the GPF's potential demise as a ray of hope for his platform. Believing that the money from the GPF could be re-invested into nuclear submarines, Gigg argued that the navy was trying to cram so many capabilities into a destroyer design that it could not perform any one specific task well. He also claimed that the GPF was too slow to deal with Soviet nuclear submarines, and criticized the fact that it did not carry a Sea King helicopter. His final criticism was that the GPF's anti-aircraft missiles were inadequate. Almost word for word, the minister would use all of these arguments to justify the GPF's cancellation.

What Gigg felt the RCN needed to combat the air and ASW threats was a combination of nuclear submarines and carriers. Gigg's arguments put Fraser-Harris in a

Photo: Naval Historical Center, NH97545.

*The nuclear-powered **Thresher**-class – the ultimate desire of submarine advocates at Naval Headquarters.*

difficult position. Gigg was making a powerful case for the *Iwo Jimas* that Fraser-Harris wanted his superiors to hear, but Gigg was also disparaging the same GPFs that Fraser-Harris needed as screens and picket ships for his Mobile Force carrier task group. The result was that Fraser-Harris did not directly sabotage the GPF but neither did he defend it, other than saying that it was "unwise for the Navy to indulge in such a strenuous assault" on the program.[5] Instead, he concentrated all his efforts on getting the minister to accept the carriers and that meant he could not be bogged down in what he saw as a futile attempt to save a dying program.

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Fraser-Harris was indeed walking a thin line. Gigg's specific arguments against the GPF were counter-productive to a ship type that Fraser-Harris would later want resuscitated. This was where the balance between competing sets of advocates could turn into a bizarre game of shifting alliances and power struggles. As a submarine patron, Gigg's goal was to make room for a nuclear submarine program through the cancellation of the GPF. Of course, the danger to Fraser-Harris' position was that Gigg's arguments might be so persuasive to the minister that he would not support any future guided-missile destroyer concepts at all. It was a risk Fraser-Harris was willing to take. But that attitude ensured that the GPF was not defended properly.

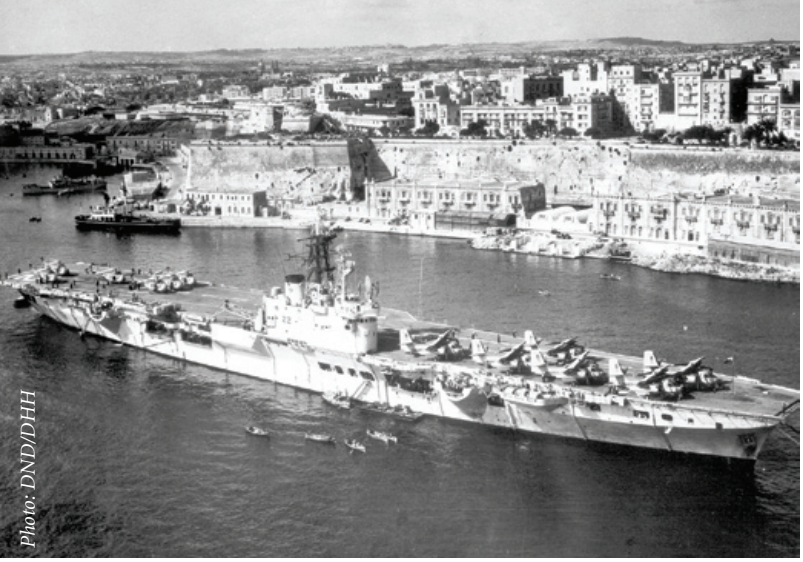

Photo: DND/DHH

*The inability of naval aviation advocates to secure a replacement for HMCS **Bonaventure** – pictured here in Grand Harbour, Valetta, Malta – ensured that she was the RCN's last carrier.*

Hellyer was under tremendous pressure from the Prime Minister to reduce costs, and as a result he saw little reason to stand up for a program that did not even enjoy universal support within the navy. By late September, after over five months of consideration, Hellyer made up his mind. He would not share that decision for another three weeks, and so Rayner had no idea that the GPF had already been terminated when he defended the program to a special parliamentary group investigating defence policy (the Sauvé Committee) in early October.

It was clear to most observers that the CNS was unprepared for his appearance before the committee. In fact, the Director of Shipbuilding Branch, Jack Rutledge, and his team at the Department of Defence Production could not understand why it appeared that they were the only ones who were mounting an energetic defence of the program. The answer was that some factions within the navy were willing to let the GPF go. Simply put, the men responsible for providing Rayner with the advice and information required to defend the GPF from Plomer's charges were all on Fraser-Harris' staff, and therefore it should not be surprising that the file on this matter shows a total lack of staff work.

Photo: DND/DHH

*The future of naval aviation in the RCN, the helicopter-carrying destroyer (DDH), HMCS **Ottawa**.*

Advocates of particular ships or policies have been around throughout the RCN's history and they have played a crucial role in helping it acquire specific platforms, but the GPF stands as an illustration of the dangers the navy faces when it fails to present a united message to its political leaders. The CNS should have had the last word on what programs would be championed to the minister. Various ship advocates not only robbed Rayner of this opportunity, but they also helped lay the groundwork for the GPF Program's cancellation.

The outcome of pushing various concepts was that none of them succeeded – the GPF Program was terminated, the *Bonaventure* was not replaced, and the nuclear submarine never got beyond the planning stage. Left without a cohesive procurement strategy the RCN's future force structure was thrown into a state of chaos and confusion for well over a year, resulting in a fleet replacement program that many officers considered less than satisfactory. And it is for that reason that one of the RCN's top technical officers, Rear-Admiral Sam Davis, noted in 1964 that the navy had become "its own worst enemy" which had no option after the GPF but to take "any carrot which may be dangled by our Political masters."[6]

Notes

* This article is the product of ongoing research conducted for the Official History of the RCN, 1945-68. The author would like to thank his boss, Michael Whitby, as well as the entire naval team for their assistance. Any views expressed (or errors made) are the author's.

1. Minister to Chiefs of Staff Committee, 27 August 1963, and Mobile Force Study of Composition and Cost, Terms of Reference, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 24 Vol. 21811, CSC 2447:1.
2. DGFE to Staff, 15 February 1963, LAC, RG 24, Accession 1983-84/167, Box 493, 1700-DGFE, vol. 2.
3. *Ibid*.
4. Sutherland's GPF Study should not be confused with his larger and better known ad hoc report on Canadian defence policy.
5. ACNS (A&W) to VCNS, 4 September 1963, Report by Commander E. Gigg, DHH, 120.009 (D19).
6. S. Mathwin Davis to ACNS (A&W), Constructive Thoughts – in despair, 13 March 1964, DHH, 79/246, File 78A.

Richard Mayne is a historian at DND's Directorate of History and Heritage and a doctoral candidate at Queen's University.