

A Covert Naval Investigation: Overseas Officers, John J. Connolly, and the Equipment Crisis of 1943

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No one aboard HMCS *Orillia* understood the significance of John Joseph Connolly crossing the brow of their ship on 10 October 1943. As the executive assistant to Angus L. Macdonald, the Minister of National Defence for Naval Services, Connolly was not considered a dignitary, and to *Orillia's* sailors the presence of this top naval bureaucrat was unremarkable. Little did they realize that their ship was transporting a man whose overseas investigation into the state of equipment within the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) would lead to one of the greatest "shake ups" at Naval Service Headquarters (NSHQ) during the war. If there was one thing in common between Connolly and the crew of *Orillia* it was their awareness that the RCN's escort fleet did not possess the equipment required for anti-submarine warfare. During the first half of the war many RCN escorts lacked proper radar, asdic, and other technical gear essential to destroy U-boats during the Battle of the Atlantic. Between 4 October and 5 November 1943, Connolly would tour naval facilities in St. John's, Londonderry, and London where he interviewed officers about these deficiencies. As a bureaucrat, Connolly did not understand the nuances of naval warfare, nor was he aware of the true extent or consequences of the equipment crisis. Yet from the moment he arrived in Londonderry, he was guided by a group of Royal Navy (RN), RCN, and United States Navy (USN) officers deeply concerned about the modernization of the Canadian fleet. This group of officers was led by Commodore (D) Londonderry, Commodore G. W. G. Simpson, RN, and included the Fleet Engineer at Londonderry, Commander R. R. Shorto, RN; Lieutenant Commander D. Conklin, USNR (who was in charge of the American repair base in Londonderry); Lieutenant Commander C. Copelin, RCNR, who was Simpson's Staff Officer (Administration), as well as the Canadian Escort Liaison Officer; and the Canadian Engineer Liaison Officer, Lieutenant J. J. Pigott, RCNVR. These men, among others, greatly influenced Connolly's investigation and played a pivotal role in bringing the significance of the crisis to official attention.' Armed with information provided by these officers, Connolly would report that the Naval Staff had mismanaged the modernization of the RCN's escort fleet. Based on this evidence, Macdonald in November and December 1943 would confront the Naval Staff over the state of equipment, and eventually would relieve Vice Admiral Percy W. Nelles of his duties as Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) in January 1944. While Connolly's investigation led to major changes at NSHQ, these officers stationed in the UK

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played a significant role, not only in influencing the executive assistant's findings but also in shaping the history of the RCN.

Recognition that there was an equipment crisis did not depend on complaints from the Londonderry officers. Indeed, the Naval staff had been wrestling with the situation for some time. In early 1940 Canada began an ambitious building programme to produce a fleet of corvettes to protect the large number of merchant ships already being mauled by German U-boats. Built to merchant standards, the corvettes were inexpensive, easy to construct, and able to be mass-produced. But the corvettes of the first programme were not well suited to prolonged service at sea, a flaw the British quickly noted and corrected. Caught between maintaining its operational commitments and the need to modernize all sixty-four of the original corvettes, the RCN was less well placed to take corrective action, especially since Canada's shipbuilding industry was already overburdened and lacked the experience and technical expertise for modernization. To complicate matters, the British had designed a much more versatile type of anti-submarine escort, the frigate, which were better suited for escort work than the corvette. By early 1942 Canadian yards began to construct frigates. Consequently, the Naval Staff in Ottawa had a difficult choice: to either begin the time-consuming task of modernization or to wait for the new frigates. They chose the latter in what appeared to be a logical decision. Modernizing corvettes would mean a reduction in the RCN's commitment to the Mid-Ocean Escort Force (MOEF), but by waiting for the frigates, the original corvettes could continue to combat the U-boats without a significant decline in the RCN's operational strength at sea. Short-term pain, in other words, for long-term benefits.

Unhappily, significant and unforeseen delays in the delivery of the frigates meant that the RCN had to combat the U-boats with antiquated equipment throughout 1942 and 1943, a period marked by some of the most disastrous convoy battles of the war. Indeed, in 1943 the RCN was actually withdrawn from the MOEF. Poor equipment was by no means the only reason for the RCN's difficulties - inadequate training and the incredible rate of naval expansion also played a part - but the Naval Staff understood that the lack of modern equipment was a serious problem. Moreover, with frigates finally rolling off the slips in 1943 it was too late to reverse course and give priority to modernizing the older corvettes. In short, the navy's top advisors were doing their best to deal with this crisis, yet to many in the sea-going fleet it appeared that the Naval Staff was either unaware or apathetic to their plight.²

Appearances, in this case, were not altogether deceiving, because although the Naval Staff knew of the problem, it did not behave as though it did. This was particularly evident in Ottawa's reaction to four independent memoranda written by Captain J. M. Rowland, RN, (Captain (D) Newfoundland); by a group of officers under the authority of Captain R. E. S. Bidwell (Chief of Staff to Commander-in-Chief Canadian North-West Atlantic); by Lieutenant Commander Desmond Piers (Commanding Officer of HMCS *Restigouche*); and by Commander K. F. Adams (Commanding Officer of HMCS *Assiniboine*) between 1 May and 9 August 1943. All these memoranda attempted to notify NSHQ that poor equipment in the escort fleet was affecting the RCN's efficiency.³ While these criticisms were not ignored, NSHQ was slow to respond. Moreover, they were never brought to Macdonald's attention until Connolly discovered the Rowland, Bidwell and Adams memoranda in November 1943.⁴ In the interim, Macdonald was largely unaware of the proportions and significance of the problems and saw no need for immediate action.

In fairness to the navy's top brass, Macdonald had been present at most of the meetings at which the RCN's problems at sea and modernization dilemma were addressed. These issues, however, were well beyond the politicians' comprehension since they were described in highly technical terms. In addition, the true proportions of the crisis were often masked by a myriad of other important issues discussed at Naval Staff as well as Board meetings. Regardless, it appears that Macdonald had never asked for clarification on these technical matters before the summer of 1943, and his advisors did not present the material in a context that the minister could understand easily.

This situation might have persisted had it not been for a memo written by Lieutenant Commander William Strange. After a trip to Great Britain, Strange, the Assistant Director of Naval Information at NSHQ, recorded in July 1943 that there were a number of Canadian and British officers in the UK who were concerned that the RCN was unable to destroy U-boats effectively because of a lack of modern equipment on its ships.⁵ Strange's memo differed from the others because it circumvented the normal chain of command and was sent directly to Connolly, who then passed it to Macdonald. Strange's report alerted Macdonald that there was something wrong, but he was uncertain of the full extent of the crisis. No longer trusting the Naval Staff, Macdonald did not inform them that his executive assistant was travelling overseas. As a result, Connolly's covert investigation was designed, in part, to report on the validity of Strange's allegations.

On the morning of 21 September Connolly met with Strange to get a first-hand account of the events which had led to his memo. It was at this meeting that Strange told Connolly of the network of officers at Londonderry who were most anxious to help the RCN recognize and remedy its equipment problems. Later that day, Strange sent Connolly a memo explaining that he had dispatched letters to Simpson, Shorto, and Copelin, among others, announcing that the executive assistant was bound for Londonderry. In reality, Strange was mobilizing these officers so that they would be prepared to give Connolly a full account of the problems. Strange expressed the need to give Connolly "a steer or two about my impressions of the reliability of these men." Besides describing Copelin as a little "muddle-headed," he informed Connolly that most of these officers were anti-submarine experts and would be most useful in his investigation. Likewise, Strange prepared the ground for the Londonderry officers by writing one of them that this was their "golden opportunity to say what you think, without the slightest fear of consequences, to a man [Connolly] who can quickly get it all to the place from which action will certainly come."

The covert nature of Connolly's investigation can be detected in a letter sent to Strange by one of the officers on Simpson's Staff, Lieutenant Commander A. M. Lee, RNVR. The letter informed Strange of the pleasure of once having had someone from NSHQ with whom he could get "all the moans off my chest" regarding equipment on RCN ships. Having learned that Connolly was coming to Londonderry, Lee congratulated him on his "success in ventilating some of the deficiencies." Pleased with Strange's ability to get Macdonald's attention, these officers quickly began to prepare for Connolly's visit. Evidence for this can be found in Lee's letter:

I will tell Lieutenant Commander Copelin that Mr. Connolly is coming to Londonderry and must be looked after with the utmost care. I hope, though, that I shall be back to see him myself, for he seems the very chap to talk to...I am convinced, therefore, that the answer [for the equipment crisis]

must come from your people and the visit of Mr. Connolly is particularly valuable at this time. He shall certainly see everything possible here and shall go out exercising with a modern ship and also in one of your own old faithfuls.⁸

Anxiously anticipating Connolly's visit, these officers were prepared to vent their frustrations about the state of the RCN's escort fleet. As soon as he arrived they would give Connolly a personalized tour.

Before travelling to Londonderry Connolly talked with some of the officers at St. John's, Newfoundland. Forewarned about the equipment problem, Connolly was surprised that few of the senior officers he met raised the issue. In a final appraisal of his visit to Newfoundland, Connolly was disappointed that "[t]he urgency of the problem was not impressed upon my mind there." On the other hand, he felt that since these officers were "shore personnel," they were not reliable sources. The day before Connolly departed for Londonderry he wrote to Macdonald that "generally speaking, I think it [St. John's] is a very happy base and, I think, an efficient one."⁹ This upbeat letter was the last communication between the two until November. Once Connolly interviewed the officers in Londonderry and London he would have a very different story to tell. Until then Macdonald would be completely uninformed about the magnitude of the crisis.

Before sailing for Londonderry, Connolly met with Captain [D] Newfoundland, J.M. Rowland, RN. The tone of their 9 October meeting was somewhat subdued, especially since Rowland, who had been one of the first officers to send a memo to NSHQ critical of the RCN's modernization problems, was frustrated at his inability to effect a change in the equipment policy.¹⁰ Indeed, Rowland did not even tell Connolly that he had written such a report." Although the two did not spend much time together, Rowland did confirm some of the executive assistant's suspicions that "R.C.N, ships were very poorly equipped with the latest mechanical anti-submarine appliances."¹¹ Still, it would not be until he reached Londonderry that the full details of the equipment crisis would become apparent to Connolly. Unfortunately, he had to weather an eight-day sea voyage before reaching Ireland. For Connolly the passage was agonizing but enlightening, as he discovered what it was like to sail in one of Canada's corvettes.

After spending five days in St. John's, Connolly boarded HMCS *Orillia*, part of the escort for convoy HX-260, where he was reacquainted with *Orillia's* CO, Lieutenant Jim Mitchell, a lawyer with whom he had worked before the war. Although sea-sick during the trip, Connolly was "lost in admiration at these young Canadians - giving up so much at home to do this." Despite the excitement when the ship went to action stations, Connolly was in a constant state of terror. Finding life at sea unbearable, he confided in his diary that "[o]ne can't go through this thing without a deep emotional reaction." While at sea he gained an appreciation of the crew's morale and was stunned that there were few complaints. He discovered a strong sense among the crew that they had a job to do; instead of complaining, they followed the Captain's creed of "bring on the subs." At one point during the passage Connolly found that "[s]ome officers [are] pessimistic about [their] ability to deal [with the U-boats]...When you see the waves, the rain, and the pitching of the ship you realize that only fair equipment is not enough & they need the best."¹²

Even though the ship's company did not express their grievances directly to Connolly, he witnessed enough deficiencies in *Orillia* to form his own conclusions. In a

report after he returned to Ottawa, he told Macdonald that "the equipment carried in *Orillia* is all quite antiquated." In his final assessment of the voyage, Connolly simply concluded that it was "suicide to send ships like *Orillia* to Derry."¹⁴ Realizing that many officers at NSHQ had not been to sea during the war, Connolly believed that his voyage had given him a unique perspective. With a new-found confidence in his knowledge of life in a corvette, he was ready to discover why the equipment on Canadian ships was so poor. Moreover, considering that he had just survived one of the most terrifying experiences of his life, it should not be surprising that the criticisms he was soon to hear impressed him so profoundly.

As members of Simpson's Staff, the officers he met had no official authority over Canadian ships; indeed, administrative control belonged to Rowland. But the officers in Londonderry were united in the belief that the real culprit of the RCN's deficiencies was NSHQ. Although they were only responsible for RN escorts, these men were tired of lamenting the state of equipment on Canadian ships entering Londonderry. To them, the ultimate victims of NSHQ's "ineptitude" were Canadian sailors; as a result, they were determined to take advantage of Connolly's visit.¹⁵

The day after *Orillia* came alongside at Lissahali, Ireland, Connolly and Mitchell drove to Londonderry, where they met with Copelin. Besides being Simpson's Administrative staff officer, he was also the senior Canadian naval officer at Londonderry. Having served in HMCS *Halifax*, and previously having spent two years at sea, Connolly considered Copelin an expert on the state of equipment on Canadian warships.¹⁶ In reality, Copelin's administrative functions were specifically related to RN ships, which meant that his perspective was limited to RCN vessels that visited Londonderry. As a result, Copelin provided a somewhat biased account of the equipment crisis. He was not alone in this regard, since all the officers Connolly interviewed in Londonderry, including Simpson, could not possibly understand the difficulties NSHQ faced regarding the equipment crisis. Nonetheless, much of Copelin's information was both relevant and accurate.

During the meeting in Copelin's office on the morning of 19 October Connolly learned that there were a number of Canadian officers on Simpson's staff who would take advantage of any situation to help RCN ships secure available equipment in Londonderry.¹⁷ As Connolly later discovered, most of these acquisitions were achieved through unofficial methods since, having grown tired of delays obtaining the necessary approval from NSHQ, these officers in Londonderry would act independently. This point was reinforced by Mitchell, who advised Connolly that "it is felt by the sea-going officers in R.C.N., corvettes that it is easier for them to get repairs and equipment in Derry than in Canadian yards."¹⁸ While it was true that the smaller Canadian yards were experiencing difficulties managing both the RCN's construction program and its refit commitments, Connolly's conclusion was somewhat naive in that it was based only on Copelin's and Mitchell's observations. Having been forewarned that the RCN was experiencing a major modernization problem, Connolly was doubtless extremely susceptible to accept all the reports from the officers in Londonderry as fact.

Nevertheless, Connolly was presented with evidence that one of the major problems was a lack of communication between NSHQ and naval authorities in the UK. He was constantly instructed that this was most serious in the field of technical liaison. Connolly's interviews in both Londonderry and London provided him with ample evidence that the Canadian technical liaison organization was totally inefficient. This was an accurate portrayal: only one Canadian officer was assigned to technical liaison in Britain, and he was

in charge of observing and reporting on all the experimental equipment programmes conducted by the RN. This was too much work for one man to handle. In reality, the most this officer could hope to achieve was to keep abreast of developments with the main Admiralty organization in London. Further, the organization within Ottawa was weak, since advances in anti-submarine equipment were not always passed to the officers who could have made the most use of them at NSHQ. This caused major delays in Canadian modernization since it took an excessive amount of time for NSHQ to learn about developments in ASW equipment. Although NSHQ had been aware of this problem, Copelin told Connolly that the RCN's attempts to modernize were being affected by this communication quagmire between Ottawa and London. In his final summation, Connolly later advised Macdonald that "too much importance cannot be placed upon the need of good technical men at Deny." As a result, he proposed that Copelin fill this role and "make periodic reports, which should be as frankly critical as may be necessary."¹⁹ Like the other officers in Londonderry, Copelin had successfully planted the idea in Connolly's mind that Canada's escort fleet was suffering from a debilitating equipment crisis because of a lack of direction from NSHQ. While Connolly was convinced that there was a problem with the RCN's technical liaison network, Copelin discussed other cases which caused the executive assistant to lose confidence in the RCN's top brass.

Frustrated by the failure to modernize the escorts, Copelin then took direct aim at NSHQ. Much of this disappointment was based on the unorthodox methods which the officers in Londonderry previously had to use to ensure that Canadian warships received at least some modern equipment. Copelin bemoaned that NSHQ had not established a definite refit schedule for RCN ships; if such existed, it would be possible to use the American yard in Londonderry "up to a point where it will only be necessary in Canada to dry-dock the ship and make major hull alterations." Although the refitting of the escort fleet was not as easy as Copelin implied, it was clear that he was blaming NSHQ; Copelin's letter to Connolly of 23 October said as much: "it is interesting to note that, on the 30th September this year, Naval Service Headquarters stated that, as the whole question of re-modelling R.C.N. Corvettes is at present under review, it is not possible to state at this moment which ships will be taken for these Alterations and Additions."²⁰ While NSHQ had been slow to respond to the equipment crisis, Copelin's criticism was a little one-sided. The 30 September policy to which Copelin referred was actually an NSHQ memorandum proposing to replace a refit policy established on 20 August with an alternative involving fourteen Canadian corvettes. This policy began with HMCS *Dunegan*, and would end in early 1944 with the refit of HMCS *Shawinigan*.²¹

In fairness, NSHQ had been forced to adapt the 20 August refit policy because the British Admiralty had sent a signal to Ottawa on 24 August expressing "regret that heavy pressure of refitting and other ship work in hand and in prospect in this country renders remote any likelihood of undertaking even a substantial part of work on remaining [Canadian] ships in question."²² Although NSHQ's 20 August refit policy was modest, it represented an attempt to modernize Canadian ships. This policy, however, was thrown into disarray by the Admiralty message.²³ As a result, Copelin's criticism of NSHQ's failure to provide Londonderry with a refit policy was not entirely justified. In fact, it represented a major contradiction. Later in Connolly's investigation Simpson would repeat Copelin's criticism, and both Conklin and Pigott would offer the services of the American yard in Londonderry to help modernize Canadian ships. Meanwhile, the 24 August Admiralty

message left NSHQ with the impression that it could not count on any British assistance for their modernization dilemma. Unfortunately for NSHQ, Connolly was unaware of this Admiralty message at the time; instead, he was privy only to the interpretation of the officers in Londonderry. Connolly therefore formed the somewhat mistaken belief that NSHQ had never devised a refit policy.²⁴ While this interpretation was not totally without foundation, since the 20 August policy was so modest it is important to note that Connolly was being presented with only one side of the issue.

Later on 19 October, Connolly met with Simpson and the Naval Officer in Charge at Londonderry, Captain C. Glencross. It was not long before Connolly realized that the Commodore's concern over the state of equipment on Canadian ships was based on his deep admiration for the average Canadian sailor. Pointing to the exercise reports as evidence, Simpson told Connolly that the "intelligence" and "enthusiasm" of the Canadian sailor was unsurpassed by any other group of seaman, including those of the RN.²⁵ While this counteracted some of the negative effects that the poor state of equipment was having on their efforts at sea, Simpson felt that neglect by NSHQ prevented the Canadian escort fleet from proving itself. Simpson had a high opinion of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve and felt it necessary to inform Connolly that many of these sailors resented what they felt was NSHQ's ignoring of the needs of the escort fleet. Connolly recorded the reasons for this resentment, noting that the "RCN tho't [thought] of buldg [building] a big navy but not giving too much thought to perils and needs of men at sea."²⁶ At this time the RCN was attempting to acquire aircraft carriers, cruisers, and fleet destroyers from Britain as the proposed nucleus of a balanced postwar fleet.²⁷ Simpson saw this strategy as a huge blunder. After his return to Ottawa, Connolly would report directly to Macdonald that Simpson had "one great conclusion to pass on...to modernize the corvettes and all the existing Canadian craft. Make them as thoroughly efficient fighting units as they possibly can be. Make this commitment prior to the acquisition of any additional ships." In fact, Simpson felt that the new escort construction programme should be curtailed; he believed that a modernized corvette with an experienced crew was "better than new [Canadian] Frigates."²⁸

Although Simpson had provided Connolly with some interesting general observations on the state of equipment in Canada's escort fleet, it was his staff officers who provided the details. One of the most valuable officers whom Connolly interviewed was Commander R.R. Shorto. As the Senior Engineering Officer in Londonderry, and one of the officers who had moulded the Strange memorandum, Shorto provided Connolly with specific examples of Canadian equipment problems. He stated that he had been in Newfoundland in 1941 and had found the engineering facilities in "a condition that shocked him." This experience convinced Shorto that he might have to use unofficial methods to help Canadian ships acquire equipment. When the two men addressed the present state of refits in the RCN, Connolly found that "Shorto was very frankly critical of the delays experienced in getting authority from N.S.H.Q. to fit urgently needed gear into R.C.N, ships in Derry." Using the case of HMCS *Skeena* as an example, Shorto informed Connolly of the undue "slowness" in obtaining approval from NSHQ for urgent refit requirements.²⁹

The policy at Londonderry technically was that financial authority had to be obtained from NSHQ before specific alterations were completed. Since NSHQ was so slow in providing such authority, Shorto would go through the motions of requesting permission. Shorto would then authorize the work, realizing that NSHQ would not respond. Although

Shorto was clearly breaking the rules, Connolly concluded that "[t]his is not a satisfactory way to do business but it is the only way that he found workable." Since Shorto was only interested in helping RCN ships get the necessary equipment, Connolly found his actions justifiable. In his final analysis of this meeting, Connolly noted that "Shorto suggested that we might approach the problem of fitting ships with the latest equipment without so much consideration of financial obstacles." As did Simpson and Glencross, Shorto recommended that the present escort construction be halted until the present fleet had been modernized. He observed as well that good RCN technical liaison officers were desperately required in the UK. Slowly, Connolly saw a pattern emerging as each of these officers repeated the same message: NSHQ had mismanaged the modernization of the RCN.³⁰

On the last day of his visit to Londonderry, Connolly met with Conklin and Pigott. As head of the American repair yard in Londonderry, Conklin was most anxious to help the Canadians. In part, this was because he had little work for American ships (since only two percent of the vessels on the "North Atlantic Run" were USN), and the RN preferred its vessels to be refitted at the British yards of Harland and Wolff. As a result, Conklin informed Connolly that the RCN was missing a valuable opportunity to use the under-utilized American yard. Connolly was greatly affected by the opinions of this American "miracle man."

Before leaving Londonderry, Conklin presented Connolly with a report which both he and Macdonald would subsequently use to place Nelles on the defensive once they confronted him in November. The covering letter exposed the covert and delicate nature of Connolly's investigation: "The attached data is sufficient to get many people in trouble [at NSHQ], but it is not intended to do that in the least. We only want to see better repairs for the ships at sea, and so I trust you will use the information judiciously."³¹ The purpose of the report, according to Conklin, was to bring to Connolly's attention some specific examples of the failures of Canadian dockyards "to carry their share of the load" in refitting RCN warships. He informed Connolly that Canadian yards had been experiencing difficulties for some time, but that the most pressing concern was their continuing inability to correct these problems. In his report, Conklin illustrated his point with cases of Canadian warships, including *St. Laurent*, *Pictou*, *Restigouche*, and *Drumheller*. It described excessive delay, poor workmanship, and general incompetence. To Connolly, Conklin had provided "four concrete cases where repairs in Canadian ships have been badly bogged down" in Canadian repair yards.³² It is not surprising, therefore, that Macdonald and Connolly would focus on the example of HMCS *Pictou* when they confronted Nelles and the Naval Staff in November since it appeared to encompass most of the failures experienced in Canadian yards.

Between December 1942 and April 1943, *Pictou* lay in refit at Liverpool, Nova Scotia. Arriving in Londonderry after, the ship submitted a defect list which comprised sixty-three hull, forty-eight engineering, and thirteen electrical items. As Conklin adeptly remarked, "it is difficult to understand why this ship was compelled to remain out of service for five (5) months during which time no work was done that could not have been accomplished in one months [sic] time."³³ Although *Pictou* was an extreme example, Connolly believed that this type of mismanagement was the norm for Canadian ship yards.

Despite his warning that the defects in HMCS *Drumheller* were so serious that they could "easily cause loss of the ship," Conklin's report discussed only four specific vessels. It could therefore be argued that the report should not have had such a profound effect on Connolly. Admitting that his account was "not meant to be a complete report," Conklin

expressed his wider understanding: "It is certainly appreciated that the Canadian dockyards have serious problems with which to cope, but it is the desire of American and British authorities in Londonderry to increase the efficiency of the North Atlantic sea-going Royal Canadian Navy."³⁴ Conklin's comment is significant because it provides further evidence of collusion between British, American and Canadian officers in Londonderry who wanted to effect change in NSHQ's equipment policy by taking advantage of Connolly's visit. Furthermore, it appears likely that Conklin's report had a profound effect on Connolly in part because he had already received similar reports from Copelin, Simpson and Shorto.

Even though Connolly had already seen enough evidence to convince him of a serious equipment crisis in the RCN, he received another report on 23 October. Written primarily by Lieutenant J.J. Pigott, RCNVR, this report also underscored that these officers in Londonderry were specifically attempting to use Connolly's investigation to effect change at NSHQ. Pigott in a covering letter said as much: "Lieut. Commander Conklin and I have collaborated on a brief memorandum which is being forwarded to you in the hope that it may help you to make a few constructive suggestions when you return to Canada." Pigott was normally the Canadian Engineer Liaison officer in Londonderry, but in reality he worked for Conklin. His primary duty was to liaise between the American repair yard and the few Canadian ships that visited this facility. In this capacity Pigott believed that Canadian ships had suffered from long periods of neglect and that the "Engineering conditions on H. M. C. S. Corvettes with regard to efficiency and cleanliness were found to be disgraceful."³⁵ He then provided some specific examples of the engineering deficiencies common in RCN corvettes, deficiencies well known to the Americans at Londonderry. Pigott concluded his report by noting that USN authorities were more than willing to help the Canadians.

This was an offer which Conklin had also made to Connolly. After listing the problems with Canadian repair facilities, Conklin had reported to Connolly that the American yard had 800 men who could "do miraculous things to ships in a short period of time." Conklin even claimed that his men could extend the foc'sle of a ship in a mere two weeks. Both Simpson and Shorto felt that this was a slight exaggeration, and in fact Conklin was often accused of attempting to "build a reputation for himself."³⁶ Nonetheless, Simpson stated that the offer to take Canadian ships in hand for refit was invaluable since, "Conklin could do in 6 weeks what Canada does in 6 months."³⁷ With this promise to refit more Canadian ships, Connolly and Macdonald would challenge Nelles' claim that his staff had explored every possibility to secure more yards for RCN vessels.³⁸ At the time of his investigation Connolly was convinced that the American yard at Londonderry was one of the best options for the RCN to begin the process of modernizing its ships. To Connolly, the value of his investigation was already overwhelmingly apparent. Not only had he gathered irrefutable evidence that the RCN was suffering from a severe modernization problem, but he also believed that he had personally discovered a solution. More important, Connolly was convinced that NSHQ had not investigated the possibility of asking for British or American help. With this information in hand, Connolly proceeded to England, where he found that "everything which Conklin said was endorsed by Comm[ander] Price in London."³⁹

Arriving on 24 October, Connolly immediately met with Commander F. Price, RCNVR, the Senior Canadian Naval Officer in London. As the major liaison between the Admiralty and NSHQ, Price and his London office played a vital role for the RCN. Before meeting with Price, Connolly had been informed that the London office had failed to secure Admiralty assistance in modernizing Canadian escorts. It did not take long for Connolly to

conclude that NSHQ, rather than the London office, was at fault for not communicating the RCN's needs to the Admiralty. Macdonald later reported that "Commander Price was doing everything he could to make equipment available for the ships which require it when they get to Londonderry."⁴⁰ While the communication between London and Londonderry could be improved, even using unofficial channels if necessary, he determined that the real logjam was at NSHQ.

Connolly found that Canadian personnel in London worked hard under heavy personal pressure to further the requirements of the RCN. Whoever is "there must be a fighter," he informed Macdonald, and "must have the facilities to apply pressure on lower officials to get stuff from the higher officials." The major problem was that NSHQ did not properly communicate with Price and his staff. In fact, Connolly discovered that the London office did not enjoy the confidence of Nelles and the Naval Staff. Often Price was not informed of important policy decisions or requirements, and therefore was unable to carry out his duties properly. Connolly personally instructed Nelles on his return that all important signals from NSHQ should be circulated to Price in order to keep "him in the picture" and to show the Admiralty that "he is in the confidence of N.S.H.Q." He also found that the London office was frustrated because many of its signals to Ottawa went unanswered. In his final assessment, Connolly found that the London office had desperately attempted to help RCN ships acquire more equipment, but that this task was complicated by NSHQ's failure to keep it in the loop. He concluded that NSHQ needed to make a concerted effort to communicate with Price so that "Ottawa will know what is going on in the minds of London and London will know what is going on in the minds of Ottawa." While his suggestion that this contact should be hourly was excessive, clearly Connolly felt NSHQ was at fault for the communication difficulties with the United Kingdom.⁴¹

Deficiencies in the communication network with Ottawa was not the only problem Price saw with the RCN organization in the UK. Like the officers in Londonderry, Price believed it was essential to place more technical liaison officers in Britain. With regard to the state of equipment in their ships, he advised Connolly that "the sea-going men definitely felt that they were being let down by N.S.H.Q." In his opinion, there was much justification to this view, since Canadian technical gear was totally outmoded by the time it was delivered to the ships. The key to rectifying the problem involved posting officers to Londonderry and London solely to keep NSHQ abreast of developments with British anti-submarine equipment. At the time of Connolly's investigation, Price had only Lieutenant E.G. Law, RCNVR, and Lieutenant H. Wright, RCNVR, who, among other duties, were assigned to liaise with the Admiralty on technical advances. This was a totally unsatisfactory situation, and the improvement of technical liaison with the Admiralty was one of Connolly's major recommendations when he presented his report to the Naval Staff on 15 November.⁴²

Commenting on the present state of equipment in RCN vessels, Price and Law presented some startling statistics. Price found that only fifteen percent of Canadian corvettes had been modernized. Law, who was Price's Anti-Submarine warfare officer, was a little more optimistic.⁴³ He informed Connolly that while all RN corvettes had been modernized, only twenty percent of RCN corvettes could claim to be up to date. He then noted that forty-two out of seventy-one RCN corvettes lacked extended fo'c'sles, and fifty-three did not possess Hedge Hog ahead-throwing mortars.⁴⁴ Price also told Connolly that this situation was a "matter of common knowledge around N.S.H.Q." This marked a major development in Connolly's investigation; as the executive assistant, he was being told not only that NSHQ

was aware of the problem but that it had gone out of its way to hide this from Macdonald.⁴⁵ Armed with this insight, Connolly pored through hundreds of naval documents when he returned to Ottawa until he found the memoranda from Rowland, Bidwell, and Adams.⁴⁶ Connolly and Macdonald would ultimately use these documents to discredit Nelles, and they would claim that not only should the CNS have been aware of the equipment crisis but also that he should have informed Macdonald.

One of the final men Connolly interviewed was Admiral Sir Max Horton, Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches. Meeting after Admiral Dudley Pound's funeral on 26 October, Horton informed Connolly that he was extremely concerned about the inefficiency of Canadian ships. Overall, Horton's comments were similar to Simpson's. He reiterated that while the RN appreciated the RCN's efforts, its ability to sink U-boats was undoubtedly being affected by poor equipment. Unfortunately, Horton's message was somewhat confusing. On the one hand, he thought that the RCN's attempt to acquire a balanced fleet was wise. On the other, he instructed Connolly that the RCN's primary duty still was to combat German U-boats. In the end Connolly noted that "the general conclusion obtained from his remarks was that even at the expense of the building programme we should modernize the corvettes."⁴⁷ Still, having received confirmation from the highest ranking officer on the North Atlantic Run that the RCN was suffering from a debilitating equipment crisis, Connolly was ready to return to report his findings to Macdonald.

Returning to Ottawa on 5 November, Connolly wanted to ensure that he did not lose contact with the network of officers who had brought the true significance of the equipment crisis to his attention. For example, on 18 November he wrote to Simpson that:

I had a splendid interview with the C. in C. W.A. [Horton] and having seen him, I know why you are his Commodore "D". Shortly some R.C.N. officers will be calling upon you. They will not know of this letter, but I know that they will get the same frank statements as I was given. I hope they can see the necessary people including Conklin and Pigott. We must not lose track of each other and I hope that you will always feel that you can write me as unofficially and as confidentially as you might wish.⁴⁸

Connolly suggested that Simpson continue to communicate directly as often and as unofficially as he saw fit is unambiguous evidence of his lack of trust in NSHQ. This was significant when Connolly and Macdonald confronted Nelles and the Naval Staff. In the weeks to come, Nelles would be provided with hard evidence of NSHQ's mishandling of the equipment crisis, but he was never told where this information had been obtained, which hindered his ability to defend himself and his programme. Moreover, Connolly did not limit this invitation to Simpson; Shorto and Conklin were also warned that the Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff, Captain W.B. Creery, and the Commodore Superintendent at Halifax, Commodore G.M. Hibbard, were travelling overseas to follow up on his investigation. In a nice twist, just as Strange had prepared the officers in Londonderry for Connolly's investigation, Connolly was now forewarning them about this visit. "I know," he wrote Conklin, "that you will...confirm to them the information which you gave me." Similarly, Connolly informed Shorto that the efforts of his colleagues in Londonderry had been successful: "I have not hesitated to point out to the authorities here the things which I felt they should correct in the interests of the efficiency of our ships...Meantime, I assure you

that the seed which you planted in my mind, I, in turn, have planted in ground which promises to be fertile (for ship efficiency)."⁴⁹ Armed with information from these officers, Connolly and Macdonald would place Nelles on the defensive by asking why the Naval Staff had not fully briefed the minister about the equipment crisis at an earlier date.

The officers in Londonderry and London had a significant impact on the executive assistant's investigation. Forewarned of his visit, they quickly mobilized to give him their interpretation of the equipment crisis. They emphasized that NSHQ had mismanaged the RCN's war effort. Beginning on 8 November 1943 Connolly briefed Macdonald extensively on his investigation, and many of his conclusions presented the Naval Staff in a less than favourable light. The effect of the Londonderry and London officers on Connolly was apparent, as he immediately informed Macdonald after his investigation that:

The importance of the problem was urged upon me so often by so many people that I feel it cannot be ignored. I do not believe I have exaggerated the problem in particular. We are now in a situation where we are very far behind the R. N. Without efficient ships, we expose our men to unnecessary peril. We also deprive them of opportunities to kill submarines. When our ships lack efficiency, our men lose confidence. The situation accordingly is bad for morale. It is also bad advertising for the Service.⁵⁰

It was not long before Macdonald and Connolly asked the Naval Staff for answers. Rather than working together to rectify the RCN's modernization problems, Macdonald and Nelles would exchange strongly-worded correspondence in which each essentially blamed the other for the crisis. In fact, much of the information provided by the Londonderry and London officers surprised Macdonald. For example, Macdonald would later challenge Nelles' claim that he should have known about the situation by charging "that if I did not know certain conditions that it was my own fault. On a question of such importance it was the duty of C.N.S. to bring before me in the most forcible and graphic and explicit way possible the true position of the Canadian Navy."⁵¹ It is noteworthy that most of the "evidence" Macdonald used in his memoranda to Nelles can be traced to the information provided to Connolly in Londonderry and London.⁵² Moreover, without this assistance, Connolly and Macdonald often had difficulty understanding some of the highly technical memoranda which Nelles and the Naval Staff sent in reply. For example, when asked to explain the technical jargon in a memo from the Chief of Naval Engineering and Construction, Connolly informed Macdonald that he could not help him "unless I could see Conklin or some other officer in Londonderry, who gave me the information which I supplied to you."⁵³ Even so, it took time for the case to be made, but by then the relationship between minister and CNS had disintegrated. Rear-Admiral George C. Jones became the new CNS, and there was reason to hope that a more harmonious relationship in Ottawa would lead to greater success at sea. Still, the twelve-week battle between Macdonald and Nelles diverted attention from modernizing the Canadian anti-submarine fleet.

While they may not originally have wanted to see the CNS dismissed, it is revealing that most of the Londonderry officers wrote to Connolly immediately after Nelles' replacement was announced on 14 January.⁵⁴ For example, Conklin wrote on 16 January that "[y]our stay among us was very short but the effects of it have been lasting. You gained the respect and gratitude of every *seagoing* Canadian Naval Officer on the North Atlantic by

your attitudes and the obvious results of your trip to the United Kingdom. Possibly it caused some of the Navy a little distress but that was for the general good thruout [sic]."⁵⁵ Although Nelles' dismissal was not specifically mentioned, the timing of these letters is relevant. Realizing that the information they had provided was causing major change at NSHQ, these men felt that their grievances had finally been vindicated. This feeling was expressed in a letter by Lieutenant Jack Clifford, RCNVR, Simpson's Special Services officer. "Things have certainly moved quickly since your return to Canada," Clifford wrote to Connolly on 21 January, "and I must say that it suits all of us here very well."⁵⁶ On the other hand, fearing that Macdonald's role would go unnoticed in Londonderry, Connolly informed Conklin that while "I am very glad the few things that I was able to do have redounded to the benefit of the boys in the ships," it must be remembered "that the action was taken by the Minister."⁵⁷ Since he was merely the executive assistant, Connolly had to ensure that Macdonald was given credit for the changes at NSHQ among the sea-going fleet.

Largely due to the network of RN, RCN, and USN officers in Londonderry and London, Connolly had indisputable proof that the RCN suffered from severe modernization problems. Working behind the scenes, these officers were successful in presenting their version of the equipment crisis to Connolly. Almost immediately upon his return, Connolly advised Macdonald that making the RCN efficient "must now become objective number one of the department."⁵⁸ Based on information from this network, Connolly concluded that NSHQ had mismanaged the modernization of the RCN. As a result, Connolly not only reported to Macdonald that the RCN's modernization problem was the result of gross incompetence by his subordinates but also that the Naval Staff had attempted to cover-up their negligence. At present there is no evidence to support a cover-up by the Naval Staff. In fact, the entire notion is somewhat far-fetched, especially since Macdonald was present at various meetings where these issues were discussed. But once Connolly was fed information from Londonderry and London, he realized that there could be serious political repercussions for Macdonald if this story were ever unearthed by the press of parliament. Therefore, feeling that he had been let down by his top advisors, and with his cabinet post at risk, Macdonald believed that the Naval Staff could not be trusted. This had serious repercussions for the way Macdonald treated the Naval Staff in November and December, and also produced a confrontational atmosphere at NSHQ. Therefore, the greatest problem with Connolly's investigation perhaps was its covert nature. While the officers in Britain provided him with some pertinent and useful information, Connolly also received their somewhat limited version of the crisis. These officers on the other side of the Atlantic could not possibly understand all the problems the Naval Staff faced with regard to equipment. Nevertheless, it was not long after Connolly's return before the central question in the equipment crisis became who had actually been responsible in the first place rather than how to remedy it.

NOTES

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1. I am grateful to Dr. Barry Gough at Wilfrid Laurier University and Major Robert Caldwell (ret'd) at the Directorate of History and Heritage for their insightful opinions and assistance in the development of this topic.

2. Roger Sarty, *Canada and the Battle of the Atlantic* (Montréal, 1998), 139-140; and Marc Milner, *The U-boat Hunters: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Offensive against Germany's Submarines* (Toronto, 1994), 272-273.
3. Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS), Manuscript Group (MG) 2, Macdonald Papers, F 276/10, Memorandum No. 222, Rowland to Reid, "Proposed Alterations and Additions - Ships of the Mid-Ocean Escort Force," 1 May 1943; and F 276/13, Bidwell to Murray, "General Discussion on Means for Maintaining and Improving Efficiency in RCN Escort Ships," 22 June 1943; National Archives of Canada (NAC), Record Group (RG) 24, NSS 1057-3-24, vol. 1, Piers to Rowland, "Comments on the Operation and Performance of HMC Ships," 1 June 1943; and Department of History and Heritage (DHH), National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ), Nelles Papers, folder B 10, 1057-3-24, Adams to Rowland, "Equipment on RCN Ships," 9 August 1943. Adams wrote his memorandum with Strange's assistance during the return trip to Canada. Unlike Strange's report, Adams' memo was passed through the chain of command. Their reports were two completely different submissions, and Adams' memo was not seen by either Connolly or Macdonald until November 1943.
4. NAC, MG 32, C 71, Connolly Papers, vol. 3, Connolly to Macdonald, 13 November 1943; and Connolly to Macdonald, 23 November 1943. Connolly found the Rowland and Bidwell memoranda on 13 November and Adams' report on 23 November 1943.
5. NAC, Connolly Papers, Strange to Connolly, "Certain Conversations with Senior Officers at Londonderry," 13-15 July 1943.
6. NAC, Connolly Papers, Strange to Connolly, "Confidential Memorandum," 21 September 1943.
7. DHH, NDHQ, E.C. Russell Papers, 91/298, vol. 4, Strange to Lcdr F. Gerity, RCNR, 21 September 1943.
8. NAC, Connolly Papers, LCdr A. M. Lee to Strange, 4 October 1943.
9. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943; and PANS, Macdonald Papers, F 297, Connolly to Macdonald, 9 October 1943.
10. Rowland to Reid, "Proposed Alterations."
11. Connolly recounted his encounter with Rowland to Macdonald on 8 November. At no time did he mention Rowland's memorandum. Instead, it was through his discussions with Commander Fred Price in London that Connolly discovered that previous equipment memoranda had been written to NSHQ. It is uncertain why Rowland never mentioned his own 1 May 1943 memo during this interview.
12. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.
13. DHH, NDHQ, Nelles Papers, B 14, "Report of Mr. J.J. Connolly's Trip to the UK in one of HMCS Corvettes," 15 November 1943; NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to J.T. Hackett, 15 November 1943; and NAC, Connolly Papers, "Connolly Diary," 12, 13 and 16 October 1943.
14. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943; and "Connolly Diary," "General Conclusions," n.d. *Orillia* was a microcosm of the problems faced by the entire escort fleet. One problem included the poor accommodation common on corvettes. Originally built to accommodate approximately forty-five sailors, the complement of *Orillia* during this passage was eighty-nine officers and men. As for equipment, Connolly found it disturbing that the Officer of the Watch on *Orillia* often had to steer and depend on the ships with gyroscopic compasses, which were mostly the British vessels of C-4, because their own magnetic compass was so unreliable.
15. NAC, Connolly Papers, LCdr A. M. Lee to Strange, 4 October 1943.
16. NAC, Connolly Papers, "Connolly Diary," 19 October 1943.
17. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.
18. NAC, Connolly Papers, "Connolly Diary," 19 October 1943; and Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.
19. C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa, 1970), 315; David Zimmerman, *The Great Naval Battle of Ottawa* (Toronto, 1989), 137; and NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, "General Observations on the Royal Canadian Navy," 8

November 1943.

20. NAC, Connolly Papers, Copelin to Connolly, 23 October 1943.

21. PANS, Macdonald Papers, F 276/38, "Memorandum A & As to RCN," 30 September 1943.

22. PANS, Macdonald Papers, F 276/24, Admiralty to Murray, message 240128A, 24 August 1943.

23. Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run* (Toronto, 1985), 255.

24. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, n.d.

25. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 9 November 1943.

26. NAC, Connolly Papers, "Connolly Diary," 19 October 1943.

27. PANS, Macdonald Papers, F281/8, "Minutes of a Meeting Held in Conference Room B," 11 August 1943; *Globe and Mail*, 11 September 1943; and PANS, Macdonald Papers, "Macdonald Diary," F 391, 8 September 1943.

28. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.

29. NAC, Connolly Papers, Strange to Connolly, "Certain Conversations with Senior officers at Londonderry," 13-15 July 1943; "Connolly Diary," October 1943; and Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.

30. NAC, Connolly Papers, "Connolly Diary," 21 October and 8 November 1943; and Connolly to Macdonald, 8 and 9 November 1943.

31. NAC, Connolly Papers, Conklin to Connolly, 23 August [October] 1943. As Connolly later noted to Macdonald, the covering letter "which is incorrectly dated August 23rd" was actually written by Conklin on 23 October. Further, on the actual report Conklin mistakenly identified Connolly as the deputy minister rather than executive assistant.

32. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.

33. NAC, Connolly Papers, Conklin to Connolly, "Deficiencies in Canadian Ship Repairs," 23

October 1943.

34. *Ibid.*

35. NAC, Connolly Papers, Lt. J.J. Pigott to Connolly, 23 October 1943.

36. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.

37. NAC, Connolly Papers, 'Connolly Diary,' personal notes, n.d..

38. NAC, Connolly Papers, Conklin to Connolly, 16 January 1944. Even though Conklin had informed Connolly that it was not his intention to get "people in trouble," his promise to refit more RCN ships in his yard helped lead to Nelles' dismissal. Ironically, on 16 January 1944, only two days after Nelles' removal as CNS was announced, Conklin wrote to Connolly noting that "[t]hings go along here about as usual - we have completed our first obligation to you in the modernization of the *Morden* and are only sorry we cant [sic] take on more immediately but American 'invasion' work forestalls that possibility."

39. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.

40. *Ibid.*

41. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 9 and 10 November 1943; "Connolly Diary," 23 October 1943; and "Notes Taken at Staff Meeting of Report Given by J.J. Connolly, Executive Asst. to the Minister," 11 November 1943.

42. NAC, Connolly Papers, "Connolly Diary," 22 October 1943 and n.d.; Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943; and DHH, NDHQ, Nelles Papers, "Report of Mr. J.J. Connolly's Trip to UK in one of HMC Corvettes," 15 November 1943.

43. Zimmerman, *Great Naval Battle*, 131.

44. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.

45. *Ibid.* Besides Connolly's claim, there is no solid evidence that the Naval Staff purposely attempted to cover-up the equipment crisis from Macdonald. In Price's opinion, there was a significant communication gap between Macdonald and the Naval Board as well as the Naval Staff, and he even endorsed the idea that "perhaps the Minister

could be more completely in the picture of the Department if each [Board] member knew that at least once a week he would have at least fifteen or twenty minutes on a stated morning with the Minister."

46. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, "Memorandum to the Minister," 9 November 1943; Connolly to Macdonald, 13 and 23 November 1943. After discovering the Adams' report on 23 November, Connolly remarked to Macdonald that "[t]he Adams report undoubtedly bears out everything that was said by Commodore 'D' [Simpson] and by Horton. In spite of the very strong statements made [in Adams' report], apparently memos were passed with abandon, without much action being taken. The situation according to this file at NSHQ is that nothing can be done."

47. NAC, Connolly Papers, "Notes Taken at Staff Meeting of Report Given by Mr. J.J. Connolly, Executive Asst. to Minister," 9 November 1943.

48. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Simpson, 18 November 1943.

49. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Conklin, 18 November 1943; and Connolly to Shorto, 18 November 1943.

50. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, 8 November 1943.

51. PANS, Macdonald Papers, F 276/47, Macdonald to Nelles, 10 December 1943.

52. Many of the statements in Macdonald's 20 November and 10 December memoranda either are direct quotations from Connolly's reports or are based on the evidence he acquired from the Londonderry and London officers. For specific examples, compare PANS, Macdonald Papers, F 276/3, Macdonald to Nelles, "Memorandum on the State of Equipment on RCN Ships [20 November 1943];" and F 276/47, Macdonald to Nelles, 10 December 1943; to NAC, Connolly Papers.

53. NAC, Connolly to Macdonald [28 November 1943].

54. Maritime Command Museum, Nelles Collection, Royal Canadian Navy Press Release, 14 January 1944.

55. NAC, Connolly Papers, Conklin to Connolly, 16 January 1944.

56. NAC, Connolly Papers, Lt. Jack Clifford to Connolly, 21 January 1944.

57. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Conklin, 3 February 1944.

58. NAC, Connolly Papers, Connolly to Macdonald, "Rough Draft Memorandum," n.d.