

# ONE SHIP TOO MANY?

Because Canadians no longer live in a “fire-proof house” perhaps now might be the right occasion to pay heed to the words of Liddell Hart: “A self contained and sea-based amphibious force is the best kind of fire extinguisher because of its flexibility, reliability, logistics simplicity and relative economy.”

In late May, *DefenseNews.com* reported that Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Rick Hillier, foresees a day when the Standing Contingency Task Force (SCTF) called for in the Defence Section of Canada’s recent International Policy Statement is embarked on an amphibious assault ship that the government apparently intends to purchase and station near potential trouble spots.

The article also said that while Canadian military officials declined to give a detailed breakdown of costs, the government has invested 12.8-billion dollars to remodel the Canadian Forces by 2010, including the purchase of the amphibious assault ship and aircraft plus new equipment for Joint Task Force 2 and three light infantry battalions.

There is little doubt that the addition of an amphibious warship to Canada’s Navy will be viewed by some Defence cognoscenti as long-overdue recognition

of the Canadian Forces’ oft-stated requirement for dedicated sea-lift capability that would enable it to swiftly project a credible military force abroad in support of the government’s 3-D policy initiative.

On the other hand, assuming General Hillier must surely be well aware that the only government-approved new ship construction programme is the one unveiled in Budget 2004 for the Navy’s Joint Support Ship (JSS), other observers will probably wonder what he really had up his sleeve when he let the cat out of the bag about a future amphibious assault ship.

These same critics are undoubtedly already speculating about how the CDS might be planning to fast-track, short-circuit or circumvent his own department’s Byzantine capital acquisition process to secure the necessary additional funding he will require if he is to put such a ship to sea by the 2010 target date.

The three JSS which are to be built at a cost of 2.1-billion dollars will replace the Navy’s remaining out-of-date supply ships. When they are in service, their job will be to provide underway fleet and task group support, surge sea lift, and afloat support for forces which may be deployed ashore.

And to dispel the speculation in some quarters that the JSS might in fact be the amphibious assault ship referred to by the CDS, one has only to be aware that these ships were not functionally designed to permanently embark a serious complement of seaborne soldiers. They possess no troop landing craft, and have space for operating only two medium/heavy lift helicopters. The minimal space that is set aside for other than the ship’s crew is intended to accommodate only up to 210 personnel who might be involved in the staffing of an afloat Joint Force HQ, or engaged in handling cargo, or for the rest and recreation of troops who may be working ashore, or comprising the staff and patients of an ad hoc 60-bed sick bay.

With the lift capacity of all three ships combined being only 7,500 lane metres, little room would be left over to embark and support even a token SCTF while simultaneously carrying out their primary fleet support functions. More important, the funds budgeted for the JSS programme do not include all of the equipment the vessels might theoretically be able to carry, such as: troop landing craft; vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) fighters and additional medium/heavy-lift helicopters,

*29 April 2005 – The U.S. Navy’s newest amphibious ship, the future USS San Antonio (LPD 17), sailed from Northrop Grumman Corporation’s Ship Systems Pascagoula Operations to undergo initial at sea testing in the Gulf of Mexico.*



a modular 60-bed hospital to be temporarily set up on the vehicle deck; and the advanced communications equipment required to keep an afloat Task Group headquarters in touch with its ships and any troops deployed ashore.

Unlike the omnifarious JSS an amphibious assault ship is a special-purpose warship designed primarily to transport army seaborne units to an area of operations and support them from the sea.

The capability of these ship(s) is described in terms of their capability to lift an army seaborne unit or formation of a given size. This is expressed in five categories, or "fingerprints of lift."

- 1) Number of troops the ship(s) can carry;
- 2) Vehicle storage area – measured in thousands of square feet (or vehicle square);
- 3) Cargo storage area – measured in thousands of cubic feet (or cargo cube);
- 4) Number of "spots" available for parking vertical takeoff and landing aircraft VTOL (expressed as CH-46 helicopter equivalents); and
- 5) Number of available "spots" for embarking air-cushion landing craft (hovercraft known as LCACs).

We have yet to be informed by the CDS of the intended strength of the SCTF, but it would appear that anything less than a light infantry battalion of 700-800 would have little international credibility and even less military utility once it is on the ground. Accordingly, it is estimated that a future Canadian amphibious assault ship embarking one austere light infantry battalion SCTF would minimally require the following lift capability:

- 1) Troop accommodation – 800
- 2) Vehicle square – 20,000 sq. ft.
- 3) Cargo cube – 44 cu. ft.
- 4) VTOL/helicopter spots – 6
- 5) LCAC spots – 2

However, one amphibious assault ship possessing the previously stated lift capability would not be sufficient to fulfill the government's policy intentions. It goes without saying that a single ship with an embarked SCTF cannot be maintained constantly on station at sea.

Therefore, to fulfill the government's wishes and realize the CDS's vision, the Navy would appear to minimally require three ships of this class; one home-ported on the Atlantic Coast and one home-

ported on the Pacific Coast (possibly strategically located CFB Shearwater and CFB Esquimalt respectively), with a third ship undergoing routine maintenance, refitting and essential pre-deployment training and work-ups. Theoretically, when the three-ship JSS programme is completed and were there also three amphibious assault ships in service, it would then be possible in time of crisis for the Navy to simultaneously embark, deploy and subsequently support ashore an austere light infantry brigade group.

At this time only the US Navy's *San Antonio-Class* (LPD-17) amphibious transport dock ship approximates what is seen to be the required fingerprints of lift for a future light infantry battalion size SCTF and hence it would appear to be a reasonable option for a future Canadian amphibious assault ship that jibes with the CDS' perceived requirements.

Designed from the outset to accommodate women, and with a projected 50-year life span, the LPD-17-Class is an air-capable, wet-well ship, designed with substantial improvements over the US Navy's existing LPD ships in terms of lift capacity, accommodations for personnel, electronics, and self-defence capabilities. Its side ports enable the embarkation and debarkation of troops and rolling equipment, while a floodable well deck permits operation of two LCAC, or advanced amphibious assault vehicles, or four LCM-8, or nine LCM-6, or 20 LVT.

The ships's storage and offload capabilities provide for all classes of supplies, including fuel, ammunition, and food for army seaborne forces ashore. The ship's spaces are configured for amphibious craft logistic support and aviation maintenance and refuelling/rearming servicing on its flight deck. There are six spots for helicopters of up to CH-53 size. Three AH-1W, or two CH-46, or one CH-53 or MV-22 Osprey may be accommodated in the hangar. It will also be able to support the future F-35 (VTOL) Joint Strike Fighter, AV-8B aircraft, and AH-1W attack helicopters. Its extensive command and control spaces and 'flagship-like' connectivity enable the ship to fully support independent operations or to serve as an integral part of a national or international Joint Task Force.

Unlike the JSS, the LPD-17 incorporates the latest quality of life standards necessary for seaborne troops embarked for extended periods, including sit-up-

berthing, a ship services mall, a fitness centre and a learning resource centre/electronic classroom with the flexibility to accommodate mixed gender troops.

Its onboard medical facilities comprised of 124 beds and two operating rooms enable the ship to support either humanitarian, peace support, or war fighting operation.

So far (through fiscal year 2004), the US Navy has confirmed orders for six LPD-17 and its first ship, the USS *San Antonio*, will be commissioned in August of this year. Original plans were to buy six more between 2005 and 2010, at a rate of one per year but this has been reduced to three.

Were Canada to decide to enter into an agreement with the US Government and Northrop Grumman Corporation to lease or purchase one, or all three, of the ships cut from the US Navy's original 12-ship construction programme the estimated cost would be approximately 1.48-billion dollars per ship.

Canada currently possesses no such warships, there is no government funding yet set aside for them; and were the funds to somehow become available there would not be sufficient time to acquire and put to sea even one such vessel by 2010. Acknowledging all that, what General Hillier is seen to need if he is to ultimately acquire an amphibious warship capability and also realize the totality of his challenging vision to transform the Canadian Forces, is a longer time-line that extends his planning horizon to 2015, and a government guaranteed annual increase in the Defence budget to move it within 10 years from its current 1.2% of GDP to about 2.2%.

Without more time and sufficient additional hard cash to "make it so," it is most unlikely that the CDS's reported intention to see a Canadian amphibious assault ship with an embarked SCTF on station somewhere in the world's oceans by 2010 will be able to be realized. Could his inspired vision prove to be just one ship too many? **FL**

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