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Custos Borealis: The Fiftieth Anniversary of Northern Region Headquarters / Joint Task Force (North)

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Today marks the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of Canadian Forces Northern Region Headquarters, now [Joint Task Force \(North\)](#). The celebrations that might have been held in Yellowknife to commemorate this moment are yet another casualty of the pandemic in which we find ourselves. Accordingly, I offer the following set of reflections on the origins of the regional command that spans Canada's Northern Territories and covers, in geographical terms, the largest area of responsibility in the world.

In the late 1960s, the Department of National Defence (DND) launched a defence policy review that explored how the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) could help protect and maintain sovereignty in the Canadian North. Military analysts determined that conventional forces were highly unlikely to attack Canada's Arctic, and that the only direct threat through the polar approaches of North America would come in the context of a general nuclear war. The voyage of the ice-strengthened tanker S.S. *Manhattan* through the Northwest Passage in 1969/70 resurrected concerns about sovereignty, but it did not represent a defence threat.¹ Nevertheless, DND's Steering Committee on the Canadian North insisted that an important role remained for the Canadian Forces in the Arctic because the military possessed a level of capability and expertise "which can be used to advantage in furthering government objectives in the North." The committee's December 1969 report also emphasized that the CAF needed to be able to operate efficiently in all parts of Canada, even where there was little direct military threat.² A military presence made sense for "insurance" purposes and to assist with enforcing laws, disaster relief, search and rescue, and to prevent hostile incursions against Canadian territory. Furthermore, the CAF would make positive contributions to economic and social development by cooperating and coordinating its activities closely with other government departments. What became Northern Region was guided by what we now call a "Whole of Government" and "Team North" ethos from the onset.

On 1 January 1970, Canadian Forces Headquarters in Ottawa adopted the Steering Committee's findings and recommended the establishment of a Northern Region Headquarters (NRHQ). The next month, detachments in Yellowknife and Whitehorse were stood up to provide CAF representation in the territorial capitals, carry out liaison with territorial authorities and civilian agencies, and coordinate military activities

across the Territorial North. Almost immediately, the three personnel in Yellowknife hosted reconnaissance parties from the Canadian Airborne Regiment and Maritime Command (Pacific) (MARPAAC) who were planning exercises. Connecting with Northerners was integral to having a credible military presence, and most of the initial energy was devoted to this priority. In April, the deputy commander headed north to Inuvik on a familiarization trip, where he met with personnel at the Canadian Forces Station, the RCMP, local airline companies, Imperial Oil, and the commanding officer of 30 Company, Canadian Rangers, in Aklavik. The Minister of National Defence and Chief of the Defence Staff visited Yellowknife that month and they liked what they saw. After speaking with the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the government of the Northwest Territories, the defence minister announced that the Canadian Forces would establish a permanent headquarters in the city later that year to coordinate increasing military activities in Canada's northern regions. In the meantime, however, Northern Region headquarters would operate out of Canada's national capital – and would have responsibility for “the largest single military region in the world.”³

Thus, on 15 May 1970, NRHQ was officially established in the Mortimer Building at 52 Nicholas Street in downtown Ottawa. Thirty-nine-year-old Ramsay M. Withers, CD, was promoted to Brigadier-General and appointed Commander Canadian Forces Northern Region. Four days later, when the headquarters offices actually opened, Withers was joined by a deputy commander, chiefs of staff for operations and administration & logistics, staff officers for logistics and communications, a command warrant officer, two clerks, and a liaison officer from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND). Staff officers for intelligence and finance were posted in August, and one for operations in November, with plans to expand the headquarters staff to 35 personnel by late 1971. These people, along with their families, became tightly stitched into the fabric of the Yellowknife community.

The establishment of NRHQ represented one of several steps that DND took to strengthen Canada's military presence north of the 60th parallel that year. Maritime Command set up a small detachment of air personnel at Frobisher (Iqaluit) to support Argus aircraft, thus extending surveillance coverage over the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. That summer, naval vessels sailed into Arctic waters for the first time in eight years, initiating annual northern deployments or “NORPLOYS” that continued through the 1970s. Maritime Command began Arctic surveillance patrols using medium- and long-range patrol aircraft to survey northern airfields, examine ice conditions, monitor wildlife and pollution, and document resource extraction and fishery activities – and keep watch for submarines operating amidst the ice floes. The army began regular, small unit “Viking” indoctrination patrols to familiarize troops with winter and summer operations in northern areas, as well as elaborate paratroop assault exercises in the archipelago involving the Canadian Airborne Regiment. The new motto for Canada's Arctic patrols, one journalist noted, was “to see and be seen.”⁴ Northern Region supported these operational forces with relevant information on the region, helped to arranged exercises with due regard for “the protection of the ecological balance,” and planned for civil emergency operations, search and rescue, and the possibility of a major air disaster.⁵

In the weeks and months following the stand up of Northern Region Headquarters, staff embarked on familiarization tours of the Eastern Arctic, visited oil company base camps on remote islands to learn about Arctic operations, and conducted outreach with federal, territorial, and community partners to establish their position as a liaison and coordination hub. In September, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II approved the design

QUICK IMPACT



for the command badge and construction began on the headquarters building on Block 50 (“Evans Block”) overlooking Frame Lake in Yellowknife. (The “yellow submarine,” as the seventeen ATCO trailers bolted together became popularly known, opened the following February – and retained its name even after it was repainted air force blue in 1976.⁶) Withers and his staff relocated from Ottawa to Yellowknife and embraced their roles “with a high degree of dynamism and enthusiasm for the North,” [Ken Eyre observed](#), conceiving grand plans to develop a broad military footprint in communities across the Territories.⁷ Budget constraints meant that most of these ambitious ideas never made it from paper into practice, and the resources at Northern Region’s direct disposal in the early 1970s consisted of its small headquarters staff, less than two hundred active Canadian Rangers (an organization slowly regenerated after a decade of neglect), and a few hundred CAF personnel at communications research and radar stations.⁸ By the end of the decade, the minister of national defence noted that “neither the military threat nor the non-military threat to Canada’s sovereignty in the North is considered to be significant” and that “Canada’s presence in the North seems now to be well established.”⁹ In this context, Eyre noted, “the North, the land of tomorrow, could wait.”¹⁰



Northern Region Headquarters was firmly entrenched in the North, however, and continued to embody a persistent presence in and commitment to the region through various surges of military interest over the last five decades. Northern Region, which had moved into [the new Evans Building in November 1991](#), was rebranded Canadian Forces Northern Area (CFNA) the following year.¹¹ In 2007, it became Joint Task Force (North) – one of six regional joint task forces across Canada that reports to Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) and directs continental operations anywhere within its area of responsibility. Although the name of the formation has changed over the last fifty years, the motto that reflects its general mission has remained constant: “Custos Borealis” or “Guardian of the North.”

The “Yellow Submarine”
(photo courtesy of Maj
Conrad Schubert, JTFN).



Defence Requirements “North of Sixty”

Brigadier General R.M. Withers
Canadian Defence Quarterly (1970)

A NEW CHAPTER IN THE NORTHERN STORY

The announcement of the formation of Canadian Forces Northern Region Headquarters (NRHQ), on 15 May, 1970, in the midst of widespread, new national interest in the Arctic, gave rise to an erroneous public impression that our Forces were embarking on something altogether novel. While it is true that the establishment of this new command signaled a much greater emphasis on defence activities North of 60 degrees of Latitude, it is equally true that the Canadian Forces are no strangers to the topmost 1,300,000 square miles (or 34%) of the country.

Our first involvement in the high latitudes of the nation came in 1898, when the Yukon Field Force was formed, in Ottawa, and moved to Fort Selkirk and Dawson to aid the civil power during the hectic Klondike Gold Rush. (Today their pioneer northern service is commemorated by the naming of NRHQ’s site, in Yellowknife, NWT, as “The Evans Block”, in memory of the 1898 force commander.) Following the First World War, our fledgling air force became involved in aerial photography to support the mapping of the North. In 1923, the signal corps inaugurated a network of radio stations to bring the first telecommunications to this part of Canada. The Northwest Territories and Yukon Radio System served for 37 years and passed some five million messages concerning the lives and endeavours of Northerners.

In 1927-28, the air force and signal corps conducted the first ice reconnaissance of northern waters, to prove the feasibility of commercial shipping of the Hudson Strait/Bay route to Churchill. Carried out in open cockpit Fokker Universals, this operation was both daring and successful.

Following the Second World War, army engineers operated the Northwest Highway System, and the air force took on the famous staging route airfields, as well as establishing Resolute Bay as the hub of High Arctic air operations. Our surveyors made a major contribution to the mapping of the North, while Brigadier-General Keith Greenaway’s name lives on today in the honours list of northern air navigation. The voyages of the arctic patrol vessel *HMCS Labrador*, during the period 1954-58, added significantly to our knowledge of all aspects of northern maritime affairs. In addition to its air defence role, the DEW Line has had a significant impact on the development of the total northern economy.

From this partial listing of the Forces’ northern story, it can be seen that not only are we no strangers to the Northland, but also that, in addition to the purely military activities performed, we have been able to contribute broadly to many aspects of the development of the region. Although activity levels “above 60” were reduced during the 1960s, the 1970s have started with a clear indication that the Canadian Forces will add a strong new chapter to a proud northern story.

... The Canadian Forces [have] opened a new chapter in a northern story which spans three quarters of a century. Meeting the requirements of objectives covering a wide range of activities, we look forward not only to achieving the required military results, but also to playing our part in concert with other government departments and agencies towards the attainment of national goals for the North. While the Forces of today are coping with the challenges, there are limitations, and there very definitely is room for improvements. Size, shape and characteristics of the Forces and equipment which eventually will be needed are not yet firm. However, in the decision-making process to come, it is clear that traditional values and norms will need to be recast in the context of northern priorities, conditions and considerations. If this is done, the result should be compact, mobile, flexible units capable of performing the required range of functions within the framework of a fast, effective and economical command and control system.

Further Reading

- Ken Eyre, *Custos Borealis: The Military in the Canadian North*, foreword by BGen Patrick Carpentier, edited and with an afterword by P. Whitney Lackenbauer. Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2020.
- P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *Vigilans: The 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group.*, foreword by Rt. Hon. Stephen Harper. Yellowknife: 1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group, 2015.
- P. Whitney Lackenbauer, ed. *Canada and Arctic Sovereignty and Security: Historical Perspectives*. Calgary: Centre for Military and Strategic Studies/University of Calgary Press, 2011.
- P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Peter Kikkert, eds. *The Canadian Forces and Arctic Sovereignty: Debating Roles, Interests, and Requirements, 1968-1974*. Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies Press, 2010.
- P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Adam Lajeunesse, eds. *Canadian Armed Forces Arctic Operations, 1945-2015: Historical and Contemporary Lessons Learned*. Fredericton: Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society, 2017.
- P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Heather Nicol, eds. *Whole of Government through an Arctic Lens*. Antigonish: Mulroney Institute on Government, 2017.

Notes

¹ For recent work on the *Manhattan*, see Ross Coen, *Breaking Ice for Arctic Oil: The Epic Voyage of the SS Manhattan Through the Northwest Passage* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012); and P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Adam Lajeunesse, eds., *Defining Ice: Lieutenant E.B. Stolee's Accounts of the Canadian Arctic Voyages of CCGS John A. Macdonald, 1969/70* (Antigonish: Arctic Operational History Series, vol. 8, Mulroney Institute on Government, 2019).

² Report of the Steering Committee on the Canadian North, "Canadian Forces Policies Objectives and Activities in the Canadian North," 5 December 1969, in P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Peter Kikkert, eds. *The Canadian Forces and Arctic Sovereignty: Debating Roles, Interests, and Requirements, 1968-1974* (Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies Press, 2010), 146.

³ DND Press Release, Announcement by the Hon. Leo Cadieux, Minister of National Defence, 17 April 1970, in Kikkert and Lackenbauer, *Canadian Forces and Arctic Sovereignty*, 171.

⁴ Wain King, "New Look for Arctic Patrols: To See and Be Seen," *Ottawa Journal*, 3 April 1971.

⁵ Concept of Operations – Canadian Forces Northern Region, 14 July 1970, in Kikkert and Lackenbauer, *Canadian Forces and Arctic Sovereignty*, 201.

⁶ "Recollections of David Sproule from his tour at Northern Region HQ, Yellowknife, NWT – 1974 – 1977" (copy in possession of the author).

⁷ Ken Eyre, *Custos Borealis: The Military in the Canadian North*, ed. P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Peterborough: North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, 2020), 213; P. Whitney Lackenbauer, *The Canadian Rangers: A Living History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 252-69.

⁸ Ken Eyre, "Forty Years of Military Activity in the Canadian North, 1947-87," *Arctic* 40/4 (1987): 297.

⁹ Quoted in Brigadier-General Blake Baile, "Security and Sovereignty in Canada's North," *Proceedings of the National Northern Development Conference* (Edmonton: Northern Development Centre, 1982), 67.

¹⁰ Eyre, "Forty Years," 298.

¹¹ LCol T.P. Payan, EA/VCDS, to Northern Region Headquarters, 9 April 1992, appended to 1568 CFNA HQ Annual Historical Report 1992, on file with the DND Directorate of History and Heritage in Ottawa.