



THE RCN AND COUNTER-NARCOTICS OPERATIONS

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The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) is a versatile organization with a myriad of peacetime functions. One of the more notable contributions is that made by the navy to Canada's continuing efforts to stem the flow of illegal narcotics into North America. Counter-narcotics operations have grown in importance in recent years for both Canada and the global community, not only in defence of public health, but because drug trafficking is now a significant vehicle for funding criminal organizations, gang activities and terrorist operations. While the principal defence against narcotics trafficking remains civilian law enforcement, the RCN offers important support to those organizations in Canadian waters and around the world.

In recent years, the RCN has engaged in several high-profile counter-narcotics operations – normally in cooperation with the US Navy, US Coast Guard (USCG), or other international partners. *Operation Caribe*, for instance, is Canada's principal mission in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, established to interdict ships moving illicit drugs, especially cocaine, as those substances are transported from South America to the United States (and perhaps onwards to Canada). *Operation Caribe* is part of the larger US *Operation Martillo*, an American counter-narcotics tasking begun in the 1980s to limit cocaine shipments entering into Florida.¹ This operation is run under the Joint Interagency Task Force South, a multinational organization based in the United States that “detects and monitors illicit trafficking in the air and maritime domains.”²

Canada's participation in this operation started in 2006. Frigates and destroyers and the *Kingston*-class Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels have deployed to the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean as part of *Operation Caribe*.³ The goal of this mission is to offer support to the United States in surveillance and interdiction, using Canadian warships as platforms for civilian law enforcement. In practice, this means that RCN vessels find and track suspicious ships which can be boarded by USCG officials. Even in international waters boarding is authorized under the Right of Visit – a provision within international law which allows the boarding of a ship reasonably suspected of having engaged in some proscribed activity – such as drug trafficking.⁴ If narcotics are found on board, they are temporarily transferred to the warship and eventually onto a USCG ship to be dealt with under American law. The United States also takes the traffickers into custody.

Cooperation with the US Coast Guard is essential because the RCN has no law enforcement mandate or legal authority to make arrests. The framework for that cooperation was established in a 2010 memorandum of understanding, signed between the United States and Canada, allowing US Coast Guard detachments to embark on Canadian warships to execute any arrests and, by all accounts, this has been a highly effective partnership.⁵ Since 2006, Canadians working under *Operation Caribe/Martillo* have contributed to the interception of over seven tonnes of marijuana and around 102 tonnes of cocaine.⁶

The Middle East has also been an increasingly critical area in conducting counter-narcotic operations. Terrorist organizations often use the trade of illicit substances to fund their activities and Canada participates in counter-terrorism missions in the Middle East through *Operation Artemis*. One component of this operation is securing Middle Eastern waters, such as the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Here, RCN vessels are integrated into the Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150), the unit responsible for counter-terrorism operations. This is a 33-state partnership and Canada has assumed operational control of this coalition several times since 2008. CTF 150 works with countries in the target regions to ensure the safety and stability of the Indian Ocean and its connecting bodies of water, and over the years has seized and destroyed thousands of kilograms of illegal substances.^{vii}

The final major area of interest for Canadian counter-narcotic missions is West Africa. Begun in 2018, *Operation Projection* is a Canadian mission to build security and enhance Canada's international relations around the world. While in West Africa, the RCN ships participate in Obangame Express, a multinational exercise organized and conducted by the US Navy, that seeks to improve safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea on the West Coast of Africa. While Canada does not participate in actual interventions of illicit substances, it does conduct training missions with an eye towards strengthening the West African maritime security forces responsible for that intervention. With its African partners, Canada engages in interdiction scenarios focused on boarding, searching and seizure techniques.^{viii}

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had an impact on the RCN and its ability to conduct counter-narcotic missions. Two ships were deployed as part of *Operation Caribe* in 2020, however the ships were ordered home well in advance of the mission's planned end date. The situation is the same for *Operation Projection West Africa*, with the ships deployed to West Africa recalled early.^{ix} The RCN sailors who were deployed for *Operation Artemis* had finished their deployment and were home before the outbreak began.^x In early April 2020, the United States announced that it would increase patrols in the Caribbean region, but over the summer counter-narcotics operations were conducted without RCN ships. On 26 October 2020, however, HMCS *Summerside* departed from Halifax on a two-month deployment to the Caribbean Sea as the RCN returned to *Operation Caribe* in support of the US-led counter-narcotics campaign.

Additional Reading

(Commander) Paul W. Forget, "Law Enforcement Detachments and the Canadian Navy: A New Counter-Drug Capability," *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 4-9.

Notes

¹ Lucas Kenward, "Op Caribe: A Drug Smuggler's Nightmare." Speaker's Dinner, Toronto, 13 July 2016, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EZEDtmrHcw&list=PL3O3dXIQ5kLKj6_JczyirKiVUn-EKym8d&index=6&t=0s.

² Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATFS), "About Us," available at www.jiatfs.southcom.mil/About-Us/.

³ Department of National Defence, “Operation Caribe,” Government of Canada, 27 November 2018, available at www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-caribbe.html.

⁴ Efthymios D. Papastravidis, “Crimes at Sea: A Law of the Sea Perspective,” *Crimes at Sea* (Boston: Centre for Studies and Research in International Law and International Relations, 2014), p. 16.

⁵ Kenward, “Op Caribe: A Drug Smuggler’s Nightmare.”

⁶ Todd Coyne, “Canadian Warships Depart Vancouver Island for Central American Drug Operation,” *CTV News* (10 February 2020).

^{vii} Department of National Defence, “Operation Artemis,” Government of Canada, 20 March 2018, available at www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-artemis.htm.

^{viii} Department of National Defence, “Operation Projection,” Government of Canada, 22 August 2018, available at www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-projection.html.

^{ix} Department of National Defence, “Current Operations List,” Government of Canada, 26 November 2018, available at www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/list.html.

^x Department of National Defence, “Operation Artemis.”

Additional Reading

(Commander) Paul W. Forget, “Law Enforcement Detachments and the Canadian Navy: A New Counter-Drug Capability,” *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 4-9.