



The RCN and Counter-Narcotics Operations¹

In addition to its combat role and its responsibility for the defence of Canada's maritime approaches, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) has a host of other peacetime taskings and objectives unrelated to combat. Among these functions is the RCN's enduring efforts to address and reduce the import of illegal narcotics into Canada and North America. Drug trafficking is an ever-increasing concern both nationally and internationally, due to its detrimental impacts on public health and its ability to fund the operations of terrorist, gang, and other criminal organizations. Though the responsibility for tackling this issue falls to civilian law enforcement agencies, navies like the RCN provide critical support in the struggle against illicit drug trafficking.

The RCN's efforts have led it to partake in counter-narcotic operations around the globe, oftentimes in collaboration with international partners, especially the US Coast Guard (USCG) and US Navy (USN). This cooperation, particularly with the USCG, is necessary because the RCN lacks a law enforcement mandate. Though international law provides for the Right of Visit in international waters, whereby a ship can be boarded if it is reasonably suspected to have partaken in an illegal activity like drug trafficking,² the RCN itself does not have legal authority to place individuals under arrest. Consequently, Canada and the US signed a memorandum of understanding in 2010 permitting USCG detachments to travel aboard Canadian warships to perform arrests.³ As such, if USCG officials locate narcotics aboard a vessel, those narcotics are transferred to the RCN warship and thereafter to USCG vessels, with US officials arresting the traffickers under American law. This arrangement has proven to be effective.⁴

A key theatre for counter-narcotic operations for the RCN is the eastern Pacific Ocean and Caribbean. There, the RCN regularly participates in Operation *Caribbe*, deploying its destroyers, frigates, and Kingston-class Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels to intercept and impede the movement of illicit drugs, particularly cocaine, from South America to the US and potentially onwards to Canada. This operation is the Canadian component of the US-led Operation *Martillo*, a counter-narcotics operation that commenced in the 1980s in response to the inflow of cocaine shipments into Florida.⁵ Now, responsibility for the operation falls to Joint Interagency Task Force South, a multi-national but US-based organization that seeks to "target, detect and monitor illicit drug trafficking in the air and maritime domains, within the Joint Operating Area (JOA)."⁶ For the RCN, participation in this operation is primarily aimed at supporting the US's interdiction and surveillance efforts, which it does by operating warships as platforms for US civilian law enforcement personnel, as well as locating and tracking suspicious vessels for the USCG officials to board and investigate. Having participated in this operation since 2006, Canadians have contributed to the interception of an approximate 102 tonnes of cocaine and over 7 tonnes of marijuana through their participation in Operation *Caribbe* and Operation *Martillo*.⁷

In addition to the eastern Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, the RCN's participation in counter-narcotics operations has also increasingly seen it deploying to the Middle East. Here, Operation *Artemis*, now involving a partnership of 33 nations, seeks to counter the illicit drug trade that funds

terrorist organizations and their activities by securing regional waters like the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Gulf of Oman. One element of this operation has vessels of the RCN participating in Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150), which is the unit tasked with counter-terrorism operations and that collaborates with regional states to maintain the stability, security, and safety of the Indian Ocean and adjacent maritime areas. The Task Force has, over the years, captured and disposed of thousands of kilograms of illicit substances.⁸ Canada's participation in this counter-narcotic operation in the Middle East has seen it assuming operational control of the coalition on numerous occasions since 2008.

The third and final key region in which Canada and its navy partake in counter-narcotic operations is West Africa. While deployed to the region as part of Operation *Projection*, commenced in 2018 as a Canadian operation to elevate Canada's international relations and enhance international security, the RCN partakes in the multinational but US Navy-organized and -led Operation *Obangame Express*. Aiming to promote security and safety in the Gulf of Guinea along Africa's western coast, Canada's involvement in this operation focuses more on conducting training operations to enhance the regional maritime security forces responsible for counter-narcotic interventions than directly participating in those interventions itself. As such, the RCN collaborates with Canada's African partners to perform interdiction exercises centred on techniques in boarding, searching, and seizure.⁹

Inevitably, the global COVID-19 pandemic temporarily interrupted and hindered Canada's participation in these international counter-narcotic operations. While the RCN's deployment for Operation *Artemis* in 2020 concluded before the pandemic expanded and gripped the world,¹⁰ Canadian naval vessels, that had deployed to participate in that year's Operation *Caribbe* and Operation *Projection West Africa*, both returned home early, well before the operations had concluded.¹¹ Though the US announced in April 2020 that it intended to enhance its patrols of the Caribbean region, Canadian vessels did not participate in those counter-narcotics operations over the ensuing summer months. Fortunately, these interruptions were only temporary. The RCN resumed its counter-narcotic activities on October 26, 2020, when HMCS *Summerside* sailed from Halifax to partake in a two-month mission as part of Operation *Caribbe*. Since then, the Navy has continued to participate in counter-narcotics operations in the eastern Pacific Ocean, Caribbean Sea, Middle East, and West Africa, directly contributing to and supporting international efforts to ebb the tide of illegal substances into Canada and throughout the world.

References

¹ Based on the initial Naval Affairs Program Briefing Note by Shannon Wong.

² Efthymios D. Papastavridis, "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), 16.

³ Lieutenant-Commander Lucas Kenward, "Op Caribbe: A Drug Smuggler's Nightmare," Royal Canadian Military Institute Web Transcription Series, Speaker's Dinner, Toronto, July 13, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7EZEDtmrHew&list=PL3O3dXIQ5kLKj6_JczyirKiVUn-EKym8d&index=6&t=0s.

⁴ Kenward, "Op Caribbe: A Drug Smuggler's Nightmare."

⁵ Kenward, "Op Caribbe: A Drug Smuggler's Nightmare."

⁶ Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATFS), "About Us," www.jiatfs.southcom.mil/About-Us/.

⁷ Todd Coyne, “Canadian Warships Depart Vancouver Island for Central American Drug Operation,” CTV News, February 10, 2020.

⁸ Department of National Defence, “Operation ARTEMIS,” Government of Canada, March 20, 2018, www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-artemis.htm.

⁹ Department of National Defence, “Operation PROJECTION,” Government of Canada, August 22, 2018, www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-projection.html.

¹⁰ Department of National Defence, “Operation ARTEMIS.”

¹¹ Department of National Defence, “Current Operations List,” Government of Canada, November 26, 2018, www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/list.html.