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by Matthew Fisher
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COMMENTARY

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Aboard MV Asterix and HMCS Charlottetown – The Trudeau government would have fits, but the Royal Canadian Navy should consider renaming the MV Asterix the HMCS Admiral Mark Norman.

The controversial new replenishment ship, which entered service on time and on budget this past January, has been performing brilliantly for the navy during sea trials. That was the unanimous opinion of sailors on HMCS Charlottetown and on MV Asterix after a series of refuelling exercises with the Canadian frigate and American destroyers during a hunt for three U.S. nuclear subs that I witnessed recently in the Caribbean.

The only hiccup during the five-day war game was on the American side. The crew on one of the destroyers was unable to establish a good seal on the fuel probe Asterix sent over as the vessels sailed at 15 knots in a two-metre sea with about 30 metres of water between them. However, it only took about 10 minutes to fix the problem.

Vice-Admiral Mark Norman, who ran the RCN before becoming the military's second-in-command, strongly supported leasing or buying Asterix. The admiral was suspended early last year and subsequently charged with breach of trust for allegedly violating cabinet confidences. He is accused of passing on information pertaining to doubts that the Trudeau government was believed to have had about leasing the vessel. Although there were strong signals that it wanted out of the deal, the government eventually decided to honour a contract that Davie had with the Harper government to lease Asterix for five years at will be a cost of \$677 million, according to the [Globe and Mail](#).



Figure 1: The most recent ship to enter the Royal Canadian Navy's service, the MV Asterix. The ship was recently converted from a civilian container ship for use as a naval supply vessel by Federal Fleet Services Inc. and is on lease with the RCN for the next five years. (Source: Matthew Fisher)

"I think the Asterix is fantastic," said Chief Petty Officer 2nd Class Mark Parsons, the Charlottetown's chief bosun's mate, who oversaw two approximately hour-long, problem-free fuel



transfers from the tanker to his warship. “We have missed that capability since (HMCS) Preserver was retired in 2014” because of electrical problems and corrosion.

Parsons’ opposite number on Asterix, CPO2 Steve Turgeon, served on the 48-year old Preserver until 2013. Since January he has been training four deck crews of 11 navy sailors each to handle refuellings. This has allowed Canada to once again be an independent blue-water navy after several years in which it depended on NATO allies and leased Chilean and Spanish navy tankers for fuel at sea. A fresh group of navy sailors has just begun training on the Asterix, which is participating with two Canadian frigates in the vast U.S.-led, 25-nation Rim of the Pacific naval exercise off Hawaii this month.

“I have been very impressed with how it goes,” Turgeon said of the Asterix. “When I was on the Preserver I had no idea that that was going to be my last RAS (replenishment at sea) on her. It has been a long time without a tanker, so we lost a lot of experience. We’re growing these skills again.”

Lt.-Cdr. Jay Walsh, the top navy officer aboard Asterix, was equally gung ho.

“We are the most motivated guys in the navy right now because we have something new – the first new ship that I have had to work on in my 20 years,” he said.

“I am surprised at how we continue to push each other and put this together as one team. It is a great success tactically and operationally because the military and civilian mindsets of the sailors are a lot closer than we imagined. But it is a challenge and I am sure that more challenges lie ahead.”

The auxiliary oil replenishment ship was originally built as a container ship in Germany in 2009. Chantier Davie Canada Inc. began work in 2015 to convert it to carry 10,100 tonnes of fuel and jet fuel, which it can push across to a pair of ships simultaneously at a rate of 800 gallons a minute. At the same time it can transfer 400 tonnes of potable water that it can process from sea water. It is also equipped with self-loading cranes that can bring on board large quantities of food, military and humanitarian supplies, including 17-tonne army light armoured vehicles (LAVs), and sea containers carrying all the kit from the military’s Disaster Assistance Response Team.

The vessel was designed to sail with helicopters. It is already equipped with a 35-bed hospital with two surgical suites expandable to several hundred beds and a dental suite. Davie passed the ship to its sister company, Federal Fleet Services Inc., which has a five-year lease with the navy.

A concern has been that the navy crew on Asterix might like the almost-cruise ship accommodations on board so much that they could become disappointed when they returned to much more cramped ships in the RCN fleet. Private rooms with windows and showers, a hotel-style in-room video service with hundreds of films, Wi-Fi fast enough to establish video links with home and a weight room that would be the envy of most health clubs onshore were a first in the Canadian navy and fantastic for morale. However, Turgeon and Walsh said sailors understood when they joined the military that such perquisites and privacy were simply not possible on warships. Junior ranks on Asterix said the same. They may, of course, feel differently once they



go back to sea on frigates or even smaller coastal patrol vessels where as many as 20 sailors sleep in single berthing areas and share bathing facilities well below decks for as much as seven months at a time.

Asterix's coxswain, or top enlisted sailor, CPO1 Nelson Lemieux, said: "We don't want the sailors spoiled to death. But the guys are really motivated to do this.

"I've got to admit, it is not a bad go. We are as giddy as schoolchildren. We are the first at something. We are pioneers. This is a ticket that has never been written before. There are still lots of bugs to be worked out, just like a car. We need to get it on the highway and stretch the elastic a bit."



Figure 2: The MV Asterix refuelling accompanying U.S. Navy destroyers during sea trials in the Caribbean. This was the first refuelling of American warships conducted by the Asterix. (Source: Matthew Fisher)

The current operations were about gaining "corporate knowledge," he said. "If this had happened any later than this there would have been no corporate knowledge left because not so many still remember the days when we had tankers. If this had happened even two years later, it would have really hurt."

"I do not regard this as a test. It is about gaining experience to enhance our confidence in the vessel. To my mind, it is going very well. I know the Canadian navy is very happy," said one of Asterix's two civilian masters, Captain Bernard Wentzell, a Newfoundlander who has spent 30 years at sea mostly far away from Canada on cargo ships and other commercial vessels involved in offshore oil drilling.



Wentzell took Asterix out of Levis on Dec. 24 “and got caught in a nasty 75-knot wind off the Magdalen Islands. But she handled it well. When it has fuel it is not as stable as when it is empty, but it is still a good vessel.”

While not quite as steady in the water as the navy tankers it has replaced, the sailors on Asterix praised the converted freighter’s “ship-keeping” abilities.

“They seemed like good guys but I had some concerns about how things might be with the full navy complement on board,” Wentzell confided. “I thought that integration might be an issue but it isn’t. We all want this to succeed and we are helping each other. What we are doing is crew bonding.

“There are differences. The navy is more disciplined. We are a little more relaxed. They use their own seafaring terminologies but we are picking up their lingo. We have the same salt water in our veins. This is all about teamwork and it’s working out perfectly.”

This could be seen in how the two crews had begun to come together socially in the all-ranks cafeteria and during ball hockey games and physical education classes led by a civilian the military had engaged.

Wentzell oversees the 32-metre-wide bridge, which has a spectacular wraparound view of the ocean. While he is Asterix’s skipper, the tanker works for the navy and it goes where and does what the navy wants. Naval officers and bosuns are responsible for the crucial refuelling operations.

Helicopters may begin to fly within a year from Asterix’s landing pad at the stern, where the hangar can handle a pair of bus-sized CH-47 Chinook helicopters. However, they will usually shelter a pair of smaller CH-148 Cyclone anti-submarine warfare and utility helicopters that are finally about to replace Canada’s venerable, half-century-old fleet of Sea Kings.

The success of the Halifax-based Asterix has already prompted speculation about how advantageous it might be to have a similar vessel operating on the West Coast. Mooting this possibility leads to questioning the wisdom of proceeding with the purchase of two joint supply ships that are to be built by Seaspan Shipyards in Vancouver. The government told Postmedia last month that the estimated cost of the pair of JSS had exploded to as much as \$1.6 billion each. Under discussion since 2005, they are still not scheduled to join the fleet for at least four years. Although the first steel for the JSS was cut in British Columbia last month, some sailors based in Ottawa and on Asterix and Charlottetown reckoned that they would not be operational for some time after that.

Aside from a pervasive feeling in Ottawa that the government only reluctantly took on the Asterix lease because it felt backed into a corner, Federal Fleet Services and Davie have recently faced legal problems arising from a \$2.66 million lawsuit by Navtech Inc. of Quebec City. The firm alleges that it was not paid for what it believes was its concept for converting Asterix and some of the initial design changes. Federal Fleet Services denies the allegation.



The biggest raps against Asterix have been that it was an untendered contract and that it is not built to military specifications. Critics argue it could not go forward into a theatre of war because it has a limited ability to survive combat damage. Nor does it have navy-grade radars, a war room, hardened electronics, nuclear, biological or chemical defence capability or self-defence weapons systems, although some of these shortcomings could be easily added in the future. Asterix's supporters downplay the importance of these capabilities for most of what the ship will be asked to do. They note that Canada's three retired Preserver-class vessels originally had guns but the bigger ones were removed over the years.

There have also been accusations in Canada that Federal Fleet Services has opaque ownership and that cargo ships could be converted for less money by other companies in Canada. However, these arguments did not resonate a lot in faraway Bahamian waters where Asterix was conducting operations while the alternative was still mostly on the drawing board.

Whatever Prime Minister Justin Trudeau thinks of Asterix, several photographs of him and his father, Pierre, adorn the ship's walls. Asking the mixed crew about their presence triggers lots of ironic smiles.

Fraser Spencer, Federal Fleet Services' chief executive officer, told me in Ottawa that the company can convert an identical container ship for the navy to lease or buy for a third of the cost of Seaspan's JSS and that they can deliver it much quicker than if such a ship is built from scratch.

The Charlottetown's skipper, Cdr. Nathan Decicco, did not want to delve too far into the debate about the relative merits of Asterix and the JSS but provided a balanced view of what they could bring to the navy.

"The question everyone has is: What permanent capability do we need?" Decicco said. "The tactical, strategic and political levels struggle with the question. It is above my pay scale to say we should do this or do that. Having a JSS would be a vast improvement because it can handle cargo, fuel, munitions and humanitarian missions and can also go out there as a warship. That is a breadth of experience we don't now have.

"Asterix has a civilian master. The JSS would have a navy captain who would probably have had a frigate, destroyer or tanker command previously. With the Asterix you are not growing your bridge community. There are also different risks. We might need to send the ship to a war. A lot of smart people are thinking about this."

Like his crew, Decicco was impressed with what Asterix was already doing.

"I am an advocate of capability," the Charlottetown's commander said. "I don't care where it comes from. What I see now is a navy at sea with its own replenishment capability. We cannot be a blue-water navy without it. The time, speed and distance calculations are all different. What a tanker brings to us is greater manoeuvrability options.

"Asterix is intended as an interim solution to fill a gap. That gap is now filled but there is still a gap. That is why I would advocate for two of them instead of one. We did not hear anything from



the American commanders and that is a good thing. We would have if Asterix had not met their expectations. If you take your car to the gas station, you expect it to meet safety standards. Asterix met every requirement you would expect.”



Figure 3: The crew of the HMCS Charlottetown monitor a fuel transfer from the MV Asterix. (Source: Matthew Fisher)

Over on Asterix its coxswain, Lemieux, said: “We do not want to turn this into a warship but we do want to hold it to a higher standard. The humanitarian potential is huge. There is massive space. I think that this works fine in certain conditions. I would love to have the JSS on top of what we have here.”

Like Decicco, the Charlottetown’s Lt. Bucky Branscombe explained both sides of the argument about whether to add another mixed-crew Asterix or go ahead with the acquisition of two or more JSS entirely crewed by the navy.

“You hear some people saying get two Asterixes and cancel the JSS,” the 27-year-old navigation officer said.

On the other hand, some RCN sailors considered “the juice” – in this case, Asterix – was “not worth the squeeze because what is the utility of a tanker without military specs and weapons,” he said. “Yet the USN and the Royal Navy, the most powerful navies, believe that auxiliary ships with civilian crews are good enough.



“As defined, the JSS can do more than the Asterix. It can be more than a stopgap measure. But depending on cost overruns it will cost two to three times what the Asterix does,” Branscombe said.

“What I know is that the navy leadership is clearly fighting to maintain a blue-water capability,” he added. Whatever the navy decided, being able to operate and support a task force of four surface ships and a submarine in distant waters was something supported by every sailor embarked on the two Canadian ships.

That is what Asterix has been doing. The replenishment ship is 80 days into what will be about an epic 400-day voyage. After RIMPAC is over off Hawaii at the end of July – where it has already refueled warships from Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, India, Chile and Peru, bringing the number of successful fuel transfers so far to nearly 100 – Asterix will conduct exercises and make port calls with other RCN warships in Asia and Australia before heading north to spend Christmas in Victoria. After that it will return to Asia and Australia with a Canadian frigate before crossing the Indian Ocean, transiting the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean and perhaps joining exercises in northern Europe before completing its circumnavigation of the world by reaching Halifax again next summer.

While underway, Asterix will provide fuel and water to at least five Canadian frigates as well as surface combatants from a dozen or more friendly nations. It will also be up to Davie to advertise the conversion concept's potential to several interested NATO navies and navies in the Middle East and Latin America.

“Ice aside, I have no reservations at all that with Asterix the Canadian navy can go anywhere in the world again,” Wentzell said. “This is really important to me personally. As the old man of this ship, I am doing everything I can to make this a success. I envisage this ship doing a lot of good things for Canada over the course of its career. By that I mean over the next 30 or 35 years.”

► About the Author

***Matthew Fisher** is a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. He was born in northwestern Ontario and raised there and in the Ottawa Valley. He has lived and worked abroad for 34 years as a foreign correspondent for the Globe and Mail, Sun Media and Postmedia. Assignments have taken him to 162 countries. An eyewitness to 19 conflicts including Somalia, the Rwandan genocide, Chechnya, the Balkan Wars, Israel in Gaza and Lebanon, the two Gulf Wars and Afghanistan, Matthew was appointed as the first Bill Graham Centre/Massey College Resident Visiting Scholar in Foreign and Defence Policy in 2018.*

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