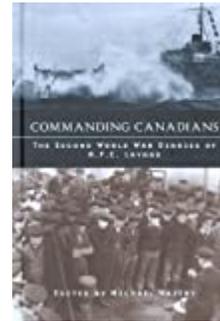


Michael Whitby, ed. *Commanding Canadians: The Second World War Diaries of A. F. C. Layard*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005. xv + 383 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-1193-4.



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The Ordinary Man in Command

In his diary entry for Wednesday, March 7, 1945, Londonderry, Comdr. Arthur Frank Capel Layard, Royal Navy, noted, after completing some paperwork, "I then walked out into the town and had a hair cut. On my way home I met a Canadian sailor in a narrow part of the pavement who made no effort to move, and so I stopped and said, 'Who is going to get out of the way—you or I?' He said, 'Well, as you are carrying a cane I guess perhaps I'd better.' Christ, there are times when I never want to see another Canadian" (p. 295).

As Michael Whitby, Senior Naval Historian with the Department of National Defence, notes in his introduction to this book, Comdr. A. F. C. Layard, kept a "detailed personal diary" from his joining the Royal Navy in 1913 until his retirement in 1947, a diary in which he "lays bare his soul and shows the human context of great events" (p. 3). *Commanding Canadians* incorporates Layard's diaries, as minimally and ably edited by Whitby, for the period September 1943 to May 1945 in which Layard was "commanding Canadians." After a short time as Senior Officer of a Canadian support group operating out of Halifax, Layard graduated to the command of a new Royal

Canadian Navy support group, Escort Group 9 (EG 9). He would remain commander of EG 9 from January 1944 until the end of the war in Europe, during which time EG 9, as Whitby notes, under Layard's "leadership became one of the most effective anti-submarine groups in our navy's history" (p. 10). From the spring of 1944 until the end of the war in Europe, EG 9 operated out of British waters under the operational control of the Royal Navy and served under Western Approaches, Portsmouth, Plymouth and Rosyth Commands, as well as the Home Fleet, at various points in the anti-submarine war.

The diary itself was an illegal hobby on Layard's part, as navy regulations prohibited the writing of such. Furthermore, Layard kept the diary's existence quiet until 1987 because of the deeply personal nature of many of its entries. It was only in 1987 that he first permitted parts of the diary to be copied for use by the Department of National Defence for use in the official Royal Canadian Navy history then in preparation. Illegal or not, the diary was an absolute necessity for Layard's well-being, especially, it would seem, during the wartime years. Although Layard had an active social life, drank a lot (if

nothing else the diary provides an extensive examination of the culture of drinking in the Royal Navy and Royal Canadian Navy), explored the local communities when his ships were in harbor, and exercised routinely, these activities were not enough. As Whitby notes, "All these pursuits were of value, but the diary was the critical outlet. Quite simply, the diary was a release, a way to get things off his chest. Without it, his mental anguish might have become overwhelming" (p. 307).

Michael Whitby has added structure to the wartime diary through the division of its content into chapters, each headed by an introductory essay. These essays add necessary historical context to the upcoming diary section. After all, Layard's service with the Canadians was only one small part of his personal life and professional career, and he often discussed personal matters that he obviously understood well but the reader would not.

It is quite clear from reading Layard's diary that he probably would have contested Whitby's statement of his effectiveness as a leader. Therein lies part of the appeal of this book. Layard is not supremely confident, cocky or distant. He is not one of the mythical, infallible military commanders of military history. He is constantly questioning his abilities, his decisions, and his suitability for command. In other words, he is an ordinary man placed in an extraordinary position doing his duty in the service of the British Empire. As Whitby notes, Layard was a member of what might be called a third group of Royal Navy and Royal Canadian Navy commanders fighting the Battle of the Atlantic. The members of the first group were well accomplished and "achieved legendary status," both within the navy and in the public eye, while those in the second group "earned reputations as skilled escort leaders although largely unknown to the public." Layard and the rest of the third group, what Whitby calls the "old retreads," were officers in their final years of service and not likely to be promoted any higher, but who provided extensive experience "and they performed admirably leading often largely untrained escort groups in a difficult battle" (p. 109).

At the same time that he serves as a representative of the "old retreads," Commander Layard also has many lessons to give on military leadership. As Whitby notes, the diary "becomes truly remarkable in what it reveals of the daily strain associated with command at sea. As such, it provides a vivid portrait of leadership in war. Layard's remarkable honesty and forthrightness strip away the usual veneer of stoicism and solitude with which most naval commanders—indeed, military leaders of all

varieties—surround and protect themselves. The lessons are timeless, and leaders at all levels who consider his example should gain a measure of comfort in knowing that the angst and lack of confidence that marked Layard's personality, and that they perhaps share, are natural and commonplace, and can be overcome" (p. 10).

Not surprisingly, Layard's diary is a mixture of observation and internal, psychological analysis on his part. Amongst the ups and downs of the daily life of a middle-level Royal Navy commander, there are a few themes which Layard devotes much time to, themes which are indicative of the diary as a whole. Being the officer commanding a Second World War naval escort group was a stressful, demanding, exhausting and often boring assignment. This was particularly true for Layard during the period when Escort Group 9 was participating in the "inshore campaign" of the naval battle (which was most of its existence). Operating close to the shores of Europe, much of EG 9's time was spent hunting German submarines in relatively shallow water and in the confines of small patrol "boxes." At times, the work portrayed by Layard's text becomes tedious and even boring, which is only appropriate since it reflected the realities of the work. For example, on September 9, 1944, Layard writes of the process of checking for possible enemy submarines, a process which he and his ships conducted over and over: "contact, investigate, check position, probably attack, examine result, classify" (p. 205). The work was exhausting and stressful for the crews of the ships and their group commander. That same day he noted: "I shall be thankful to leave this patrol tomorrow and have a spell. It has been a particularly wearing 10 days" (p. 205).

Layard constantly questions his own abilities and this becomes another major theme of his diary. While it records his own personal anguish, these entries also show his leadership style, as Michael Whitby notes: "as summer [1944] progressed he became increasingly despairing about his leadership, but he kept plugging away. That perseverance, the ability to rise above personal shortcoming to do the right thing, is perhaps the greatest lesson that Layard provides to prospective leaders, especially those of less dynamic personality" (p. 173). Just two examples of Layard's self-flagellation found in the diary suffice to provide the reader with a sense of the larger work. On April 22, 1944, his group attacked a German submarine, seemingly without success: "What I've always dreaded has happened. We find a U-boat and I make a balls and lose it. It must be admitted the lack of daylight, the bad A/S conditions, and the periscope

all made it difficult, but I've let the ship and the group down and feel suicidal with shame" (pp. 131-132). This harsh criticism of his actions was, ultimately, ironic given the attack actually sank *U-311*. Three months later, on July 12, Layard was ashore in Londonderry when one of his officers told him how contented Layard's ship commanders and crews were serving under his command: "It cheered me no end, just as I was feeling in the depths and wondering whether the other C.O.s had any confidence in me at all and whether I was fit to hold this job down" (p. 169).

Another common topic of Layard's diary was his relationship with Canadians, specifically the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve and Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve officers and men serving under his commands at various times. On November 24, 1943, when he is informed in Halifax that he might be assigned to command a new Canadian support group composed of frigates and corvettes, he deposited his true feelings in his diary. "Although I'm not keen about an all Canadian group, because one *does* get tired of them and they are *not* brought up in the same way as us, still if it is to be a mid-ocean group working from Londonderry and St. John's I shall be able to get home sometimes, which will be grand" (p. 61).

Layard's opinion of Canadian sailors varied from good to bad, sometimes on an individual basis, some-

times overall. Generally, he preferred Volunteer Reserve officers over Reserve officers, as he considered the latter to be good, well-trained sailors, but the former, although newer to the sea, were more likely to be "keen and alive" (p. 120). Although there was never any doubt in Layard's mind of the superiority of the Royal Navy to the Royal Canadian Navy, his opinion of the treatment of the Canadians by the Royal Navy also developed during his time in command of Escort Group 9. For example, he became extremely frustrated by the complete lack of attention paid by Royal Navy senior officers to his escort group to the point where he took matters into his own hands. While in Plymouth on September 15, 1944, Layard talked a senior Royal Navy officer into coming on board HMCS *Saint John* the following day to "say 'Well done'. I told him I thought the R.N. treated the R.C.N. unfairly—all criticism and no help, and we'd never seen a senior R.N. officer on board" (p. 208).

Michael Whitby writes that readers of Layard's wartime diary "will find a very human story of a man struggling to maintain his way in difficult circumstances and under enormous pressures. His success marks a triumph of the human spirit over adversity, and deserves to be known" (p. 10). Absolutely. Comdr. Arthur Frank Capel Layard (November 28, 1899 to November 25, 1999), Royal Navy, was the recipient of the Distinguished Service Order and Distinguished Service Cross, Mentioned-in-Despatches, commander of Canadians.

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