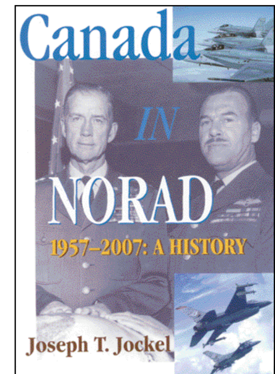
BOOK REVIEW
COMPTE RENDU

Ready, aye ready: NORAD's half-century



Joseph T. Jockel, *Canada in NORAD, 1957-2007: A History*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007.

Review by Desmond Morton

As a Canadian military historian, I am predictably enmeshed in Canada's experience in the First and Second World Wars. My only warlike experiences were with the Third World War, which, as most readers will remember, never actually happened.

There were moments when it seemed real enough. Late in October 1962, for example, I spent a chilly morning standing on a Camp Borden parade square, waiting for the Cuban Missile Crisis to explode in a nuclear exchange. Once the mushroom clouds had appeared over Toronto and Hamilton, my task would be to ferry my recruits and four three-ton trucks over to the quartermaster stores to load up with ropes, ladders, buckets, bandages and other national survival gear before heading south to rescue Torontonians. I had a better idea than most Canadians about why I would be needed, because I served a regular monthly shift at the Ontario Warning Centre. In the lounge of a new barrack block at the Infantry School, my job was to prepare nuclear fallout plots for an imaginary nuclear bomb on Detroit or, occasionally and by mistake, on Windsor or Chatham. Prevailing winds would shove a cloud of radioactive debris and body parts westward across Ontario, its shape and range determined by wind speeds at various altitudes, precipitation levels and the megatonnage of the bomb. Our calculations, based on weather reports and a coded message from NORAD, were traced on a plastic-covered map in the Warning Centre. Next, we dispatched a coded signal to the provincial government's warning centre in suburban Uxbridge to indicate how much of Ontario might soon be covered by radioactive fallout. Citizens living between Lake Erie and Lake Huron, and often as far east as Toronto, would be directed to the basement fallout shelters only a few of them had actually prepared. The rest, including my parents, would presumably suffer and die from the cruel side effects of the radiation sickness we had studied in our nuclear, biological and chemical warfare classes.

This was my chief exposure to the savage potential of Canada's Cold War. On those evenings in Camp Borden, I was a tiny and undependable cog in a elaborate binational system to mitigate Soviet air power, a system that included three lines of detection systems spread across Canada's North, plus a fleet of radar picket ships and aircraft off the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of North America, backed by over 1,000 fighter aircraft, many of them too slow to do more than hope to meet their supersonic Soviet quarry. All of us served under the command of a joint US-Canadian North American Air Defence Command located under a mountain near the US Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs.

Not everything in the Warning Centre was grim, of course, As a bachelor, I cheerfully accepted the Christmas shift at the Warning Centre. Our threat on December 24 certainly had Communist tendencies. He wore a red suit and allegedly delivered presents to rich and poor alike, but his flight began at the North Pole (unquestionably Canadian territory in those days) and skittered across northern Canada, guided by a red-nosed reindeer. Since he seemed friendly, we were spared the nightly fallout plot. Instead, our uncoded messages spread seasonal greetings to people we never met. In his half-century history of NORAD, Joseph Jockel makes no mention of this cheerful seasonal ritual, though at least one senior officer worried that a humourless commissar might use our negligence to slip a nasty surprise down the free world's chimney.

Instead, Jockel's book offers its readers a calm and well-informed account of the half century of the history of binational air defence in North America. While Canada's dependence on its powerful neighbour for its military security began with the Ogdensburg Agreement of August 1940, it took until 1957 and the emergence of the Soviet Union as a thermonuclear power with supersonic bombers to force Canada and the United States to

coordinate their air defences. The advantages were obvious from any map of our hemisphere. So were the difficulties. Of the three Canadian armed services, none was closer to its American counterpart than the Royal Canadian Air Force, but American generals had deep reservations about Canadian politicians. Letting them get their fingers on the American right to self-defence might affect US sovereignty. Time and John Diefenbaker quickly proved them right. So would Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien. With Canada's geography available as a vast dumping ground for Soviet and American nuclear warheads, Canadians had an added stake in avoiding a war fought over their territory. Even in their most extravagant and optimistic phase, American air defence planners never doubted that some Soviet bombers would always get through. My Warning Centre worries about Detroit were all part of a plan that threatened death to as much as half the population of the United States and Canada.

In time, as Jockel reminds us, the vastly extravagant apparatus mobilized by NORAD dwindled, with the advent of virtually unstoppable ballistic missiles. The three detection lines across Canada became three massive radar sites in Alaska, Greenland and northern England; Canada's nine interceptor squadrons became three. Our few home fallout shelters went back to storing luggage, junk and garden tools. John Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservatives, driven from power for not being "Ready, aye, ready" when John Kennedy was ready to launch a Third World War over Cuba, were transformed into the respectful allies of the Mulroney and the Harper years, constrained only by an inherited Canadian suspicion of costly defence initiatives that would commit us to anti-ballistic missile systems or involve an aging NORAD in an American-style war on drugs.

All up-to-the-minute history faces the threat of caches of confidential documents, especially on issues as sensitive as strategic air defence and its political management. As a professor and the director of Canadian studies at St. Lawrence University in upstate New York, Jockel has hedged his risks by drawing this book from a respected record as an expert on both American and Canadian defence and from his year as a distinguished visiting professor at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto. Where records were available as well as knowledgeable veterans from the United States and Canada to review his manuscript and add their experience to his own vast knowledge of Canadian and American defence policies in the Cold War and post-Cold War years. The result is a balanced, objective book that is occasionally embarrassing for Canadians who feel qualified to reflect on policies that might have affected our existence.

Desmond Morton was founding director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and is the author of 40 books on Canadian military, political and labour history. desmond.morton@mcgill.ca

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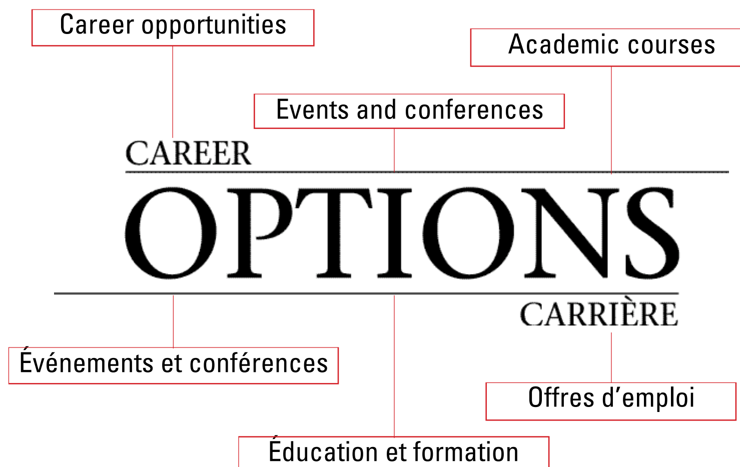

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