

The NAVAL War Against Terrorism


The departure of Her Majesty's Canadian Ship *Calgary* from the Arabian Sea on 1 November 2003, marked the end of Operation Apollo, almost exactly two years after another frigate, HMCS *Halifax* 'chopped' to the operational control of CENTCOM on 24 October 2001. It has been the fullest two years of Canadian naval activity since the end of the Korean War, and the lessons are legion.

PHOTO: FORMATION IMAGING SERVICES, HALIFAX

Forward deployed in European waters with NATO's Standing Naval Force Atlantic, HMCS *Halifax* was ideally situated to be dispatched promptly to the Arabian Sea. She was the first Canadian Forces unit to engage in the War Against Terrorism after 11 September 2001. Elements of the other services eventually also were dispatched to the theatre (Airbus, Hercules and Aurora air detachments, and a battalion to Kandahar), but the Navy has done the heavy lifting for the first two years of the war.

Between the initial and final frigate deployments, the Navy more typically maintained a complete task group in the southwest Asia region, with as many as six ships in-theatre at times. The operation evolved through what can be seen in hindsight as four distinct phases. Each was an impressive achievement in its own right, demonstrating the flexibility Canada has in its modern general-purpose fleet.

In the first phase, the Canadian task group was assigned responsibility for the protection of the US Marine Amphibious Ready Groups operating off the coast of Pakistan. The amazing part of this was that it began immediately upon arrival in-theatre,



January 2002 – A machine gun crew at action stations as HMCS Charlottetown escorts the USS Ogden (LPD 5) through the Strait of Hormuz.

after an independent 8000-mile transit direct from Halifax, without any “acclimatization” period typically required by other forces.

The second phase went into full swing as the Marine operations in Afghanistan wound down, and the search for escaping Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists began. The shortest path to their Horn of Africa bases, after making their way through Iran, was by sea across the Gulf of Oman (this area became known by its acronym as the “GOO,” which also described the hot and humid conditions). The Canadians quickly took charge of this Coalition effort, closing it off as an escape route.

The third phase began with the build-up of Coalition forces for operations against Iraq, and continued through the war there. Although Canada opted not to participate directly in that conflict, it was recognized that the stream of Coalition shipping through the Strait of Hormuz would be a “honey-pot” – an attractive target sure to lure terrorist attacks. The Canadians organized hundreds of close escorts through the Strait, which went off without major incident.

The final phase began as operations in Iraq wound down and continues to this day. Even with “active” operations over, the value of regular merchant shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, as well as the on-going hunt for Al-Qaeda, both point to the need to maintain a Canadian naval presence in the Arabian Sea region.

Sustainment of this effort has required the deployment of practically the entire major surface fleet: 16 of the 17 destroyers and frigates, and both supply ships; and nearly every one of the 4200 sailors of all ranks and trades in sea-going billets. The Canadian Navy effectively has been operating at wartime mobilization for the last two years.

And our Navy has been carrying a disproportionate share of the Coalition maritime effort, boarding suspect vessels in search of escaping Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists, and escorting merchant shipping

2002, Gulf of Oman – As part of Operation APOLLO, Canada’s military contribution to the international campaign against terrorism, HMCS St-John’s boarding team conducted Leadership Interdiction Operations to ensure the “Dhow” boats were not transporting anyone connected to terrorism.



January 2002, Arabian Sea – United States Navy warships (deployed on Operation ENDURING FREEDOM) and the Canadian Forces warships (deployed on Operation APOLLO) participate in the international campaign against terrorism: an Amphibious Readiness Group cruises in close arrowhead formation. From top left: HMCS Charlottetown, a Canadian patrol frigate; HMCS Iroquois, a Canadian destroyer; USS Bataan, an American amphibious assault ship; USS Decatur, an American guided missile destroyer; and HMCS Halifax, a Cdn patrol frigate.

through the dangerous waters of the Strait of Hormuz. With a contribution typically constituting less than 20 percent of Coalition naval resources, Canadian sailors have accomplished approximately 50 percent of the measurable achievement – they completed some 600 of the nearly 1300 Coalition boardings, an average of nearly two-a-day for the duration of the operation. HMCS *Calgary* alone conducted 92 transits of the Strait of Hormuz.

But the real Canadian naval success has been in leading the Coalition effort at sea. Our Navy was the first major fleet to arrive after the United States Navy (USN). Many of the 49 other participating nations dispatched a frigate or supply ship to establish a presence, but most had little experience operating in cooperation with the others. Our ships’ unique communica-

tions ‘interoperability’ with the USN, plus our national experience of multilateralism, made it a natural decision for the USN to delegate command of this fleet to the Canadian commodore.

Coalition building is perhaps the most under-appreciated of the naval roles in the War Against Terrorism, and yet it is the most quintessentially Canadian.

Command of Task Force 151 remains the only operational-level command exercised by a senior Canadian officer in an active theatre since the Second World War. It is a singular national achievement that we have lost sight of in the debate over participation in the war against Iraq.

With all that now over, the Navy is home and re-constituting, because perhaps the most enduring lesson is that this role of commanding Coalition fleets has become a recurring Canadian responsibility. Our task groups performed it in the Persian Gulf war of 1991, off Haiti in the mid-1990s, in the Adriatic soon thereafter, and now recently in the Arabian Sea. Odds are we shall have to do it again, and probably sooner than one might expect. **FL**

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PHOTO: MCPL MICHEL DURAND, FORMATION IMAGING SERVICES, HALIFAX