

COLUMNISTS



HMCS Charlottetown and the Battle of Misrata

By Tim Dunne

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Canada's Navy may be small in comparison with other nations' maritime forces, but the work of HMCS Charlottetown off the coast of Libya is an indication of how much our allies respect our maritime forces and how valuable our Navy is to Canada and to

international stabilization operations.

Unlike Canada's CF-188 Hornet fighter aircraft flying out of two Italian air bases in Sicily, HMCS Charlottetown is not easily accessible to news media and her operations and contributions are largely unseen by the Canadian public – and regrettably, out of sight means out of mind.

When 26 year-old Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouzizi set himself on fire Dec. 17 because his goods were confiscated and he was harassed by authorities, he set in motion events that shook the Muslim world, toppled several Arabic leaders, forced others to announce they would voluntarily step down and cause civil unrest in yet others.

Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi met calls for his resignation with military force that endangered many Libyans and drew two United Nations Security Council Resolutions imposing an arms embargo on Libya, establishing a "no-fly zone" over parts of the country and authorized concerted international action to protect civilians and populated areas.

Canada didn't wait for the UN. On March 1st Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that the Halifax-based frigate HMCS Charlottetown would deploy the following day. Rear-Admiral David Gardam, commander of the East Coast Navy visited the ship to tell the ship's company of 250 that they would be deploying the following morning for up to six months.

As the Libyan situation was still evolving and with so many question marks about the situations they could face, shore-based military and civilian personnel worked around the clock to load the ship with whatever could be needed for any operational circumstances they would face. Others ensured that passports were current, powers of attorney were prepared and signed, personal protective equipment distributed and medical and dental fitness confirmed.

The ship also carried a Sea King helicopter from 12 Wing Shearwater and the personnel and equipment to keep the helicopter fully operational.

A team of “Sea Trainers” accompanied the ship across the Atlantic and conducted a series of tests and multiple scenarios to verify the ship’s readiness while they were steaming for the Mediterranean waters near Libya.

Charlottetown entered the Mediterranean on Mar. 14 and joined the Standing NATO Maritime Group 1, NATO’s multinational naval task force led by Italy’s Rear-Admiral Gualtiero Mattesi. On Mar. 22, the Canadian Government directed Charlottetown to join in the NATO-led arms embargo authorized by the two UN Security Council Resolutions.

Charlottetown moved into Libyan territorial waters near the country’s third largest city, Misrata, as Qaddafi’s offensive fired rockets and artillery into the port and the city. Seeing the ship within a few kilometers of the city demonstrated to the residents of Misrata NATO’s visible support. It also showed Qaddafi’s forces that the Alliance is prepared to take decisive action to protect civilians affected by the conflict. Charlottetown’s crew felt the shockwaves and saw a skyline that was ablaze.

NATO’s air strikes and maritime defence of Misrata harbor established a secure environment that permitted humanitarian aid to flow into the city.

In April, maritime patrol aircraft spotted a group of small boats mining Misrata harbor with M08 anti-ship mines. Each mine contains 115 kg of high explosives and can be triggered by contact or by water pressure across a hydrostatic switch. The Hague Convention disallows untethered mines.

The city was under continuous siege for several months with Qaddafi forces surrounding the city on three sides, bombarding the residents with rockets and artillery fire. With the harbour mined, the only avenue for delivery of humanitarian aid and evacuating anyone trapped by the violence was closed.

Under Charlottetown’s protection, the Belgian and British minesweepers cleared a safe pathway into the port, allowing the harbor to reopen on May 5.

The ship’s superior combat coordination and communications systems led to its periodic assignment as Surface Action Group Commander, in which Charlottetown directed the tactical employment of allied warships and maritime patrol aircraft in the area while coordinating patrol areas and alert levels for shipborne helicopters.

These same capabilities, summarized under the rubric “C4ISR,” standing for the ship’s command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems, allowed the ship’s combat control centre to alert NATO to a major offensive on April 26 against Misrata by Qaddafi forces. Working with NATO air controllers, Charlottetown’s operations staff assisted with the coordination of air strikes that blunted the attack and eliminated several dozen assault vehicles, artillery pieces and a main battle tank. The ship had repeat performances on May 8 and May 24.

This Canadian frigate is responsible for saving Libyan lives and preventing Libyan military offensives against the residents of Misrata -- big achievements for one ship of Canada’s Navy.

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