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THE MILITARY AFFAIRS COLUMN BY TIM DUNNE

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HMCS Toronto a foreign-policy workhorse

Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea on March 18 and the subsequent turmoil in eastern Ukraine impelled the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to implement military measures to reinforce the Alliance's collective defence on April 16.

Canada's immediate response was to establish Operation Reassurance, the deployment of six CF-188 fighter aircraft and Canadian soldiers to Eastern Europe and HMCS Regina's reassignment from the Arabian Sea region to support NATO's maritime operations.

HMCS Toronto deployed from Halifax on July 24 to relieve Regina on Aug. 2.

Op Reassurance bolsters NATO's resolve to defend its member nations of northern and eastern Europe during the ongoing Russian-instigated crisis in Ukraine and to promote security and stability in the region. "Canada can only do that by being there," Cmdr. Jason Armstrong told me.

Armstrong is the commanding officer of HMCS Toronto.

This one ship has borne the lion's share of the demonstration of Canadian foreign policy for the past several years. During its previous 13-month deployment, the ship halted 8,500 metric tonnes of narcotics in three major drug busts, removing these narcotics from the drug trade and depriving terrorist organizations of these drug revenues.

Cmdr. Armstrong was assigned command of HMCS Ville de Québec in December 2013, just as Toronto's pre-deployment training program was to start. HMCS Toronto's crew had returned from a 13-month deployment to the Indian Ocean.

"With HMCS Ville de Québec, we had a ship that was going into refit, and with HMCS Toronto we had a ship that needed a crew," Armstrong explained. "So, the decision was made in the fall of 2013 to train HMCS Ville de Québec's crew to deploy in HMCS Toronto."

Individual training and training of the operations team began in January, followed by a week of sea trials in February. The ship then sailed for four weeks of work-ups. This was interspersed with additional individual and team training for damage control, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) defence, hazardous materials (HAZMAT) training, integration of mission oriented equipment, and new weapons and sensors.

Armstrong gave full marks to his executive officer, Lt.-Cmdr. Sheldon Gillis, for planning and conducting the pre-deployment training program as Armstrong assumed command, with all the administrative and management detail which that involved.

The deployment took the ship through the historic Turkish Straits into the Black Sea where they were greeted by Russian naval and air forces. The ship was “buzzed” by two Sukhoi Su-24 Fencer attack aircraft and a reconnaissance aircraft, and shadowed by Russian warships. “We anticipated a response and we prepared our team for it,” Cmdr. Armstrong acknowledged. “So all our reactions were rehearsed in our training and preparations. The team reacted exactly as I needed them to, and I received all the information I required to make the necessary decisions.

“The Russian military is a first-rate military,” he continued. “So we spent a lot of time just making sure the ship was ready to respond to anything. We were also very aware that the Russians consider this their backyard. We knew they would come and have a look with surface and air assets.

“Throughout all of this we maintained situational awareness,” Armstrong noted, quietly suggesting that they were prepared for any challenge they might confront.

HMCS Toronto was appointed lead ship of Task Unit Two, consisting of Toronto, a Spanish area air defence ship, a Turkish warship and a Romanian destroyer.

There is additional work to being a task group’s lead ship, so it was an excellent opportunity and experience for the entire operational team. Lt.-Cmdr Sheldon Gillis and the whole staff, including the public affairs officer, legal officer and air officer looked after not only their own ship, but also ships from other countries at the same time.

Armstrong underscored the professionalism of the ship’s crew. “This also speaks to how highly we’re regarded by our NATO allies to allow us to be in charge of a number of ships. The benefits are that Canada is recognized for our commitment as a NATO ally. And this was an excellent opportunity to enhance our own training and development by seeing how other nations operate. All this was added to our lessons learned, so that our successors can benefit from this experience.”

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