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HMCS Charlottetown vs. Gadhafi  
Canadian frigate proves her worth in Battle of Misrata

By TIM DUNNE



A tugboat turns HMCS Charlottetown in Halifax Harbour following a ceremony at the naval dockyard on March 2, prior to the frigate's departure for the Mediterranean. (Peter Parsons / Staff)

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 the value of our navy to Canada and to international stabilization operations.

Unlike Canada's CF-18 fighter aircraft operating from 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 Arab leaders, and forced others to announce they would voluntarily step down.

Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi 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 authorizing international action to protect civilians and populated areas.

Canada didn't wait for the UN. On March 1, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced 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 they would deploy the next 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 might 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 March 14 and joined the Standing NATO Maritime Group 1, NATO's multinational naval task force led by Italy's Rear-Admiral Gualtiero Mattesi. On March 22, the Canadian government directed Charlottetown to join in the NATO-led arms embargo authorized by the two UN resolutions.

Charlottetown moved into Libyan territorial waters near the country's third largest city, Misrata, as Gadhafi's forces fired rockets and artillery into the port and the city. Seeing the ship within a few kilometres of the city demonstrated to the residents of Misrata NATO's visible support. It also showed Gadhafi'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 harbour 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 harbour with M08 anti-ship mines. Each mine contains 115 kilograms 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 siege for months with Gadhafi forces surrounding it on three sides, bombarding residents with rockets and artillery fire. With the harbour mined, the only avenue for delivering 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 harbour to reopen on May 5.

The ship's superior combat co-ordination 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 co-ordinating patrol areas and alert levels for shipborne helicopters.

These same capabilities, summarized under the rubric "C4ISR" — standing for the 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 Gadhafi forces. Working with NATO air controllers, Charlottetown's operations staff assisted with the co-ordination 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 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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