

Joint Task Force Atlantic's Debut – *Operation Unison*

Lieutenant (N) Richard Decker

After Hurricane Katrina subsided and the destruction and devastation to Biloxi, Gulfport and New Orleans was revealed, the US military lost no time in deploying to address the emergency situation. Even though there had been a mandatory evacuation order, tens of thousands stayed behind to ride out the storm as they had on previous occasions. High winds caused much of the damage in Biloxi and Gulfport, essentially leveling the area and leaving nothing but debris. Katrina's storm surges broke through numerous levees around the low-lying city of New Orleans and caused massive flooding that stranded many people on rooftops or in attics without food, water or means of survival. It was a natural disaster of unique dimensions on this continent and called for unique responses.

Canada decided to send a Canadian Forces (CF) team, and the newly-formed Joint Task Force Atlantic (JTFA) was assigned the mission, designated *Operation Unison*. The aim was to augment the relief assistance already being provided. As the infrastructure ashore was in such bad condition, it made sense to send a self-sufficient task force. A Joint Task Force (JTF) under the command of Commodore Dean McFadden was assembled, comprising three warships (HMCS *Athabaskan*, HMCS *Toronto* and HMCS *Ville de Quebec*), a medium icebreaker/buoy tender from the Canadian Coast Guard (*Sir William Alexander*), a Composite Dive Team (CDT), a Naval Construction Troop, and the Combat Assault Boat Team from the Fourth Engineering Support Regiment (4ESR).

As the first truly "joint" operation JTFA had conducted since its inception 1 July 2005, *Operation Unison* was an excellent learning experience. What follows is an overview of that operation, the challenges and the outcomes associated with the efforts of the CF and the Canadian Coast Guard.

Initial Challenges and Planning

To prepare ships for sailing on the last long weekend of the summer, leave was cancelled and personnel recalled



Photo: Coast Guard (website).
CCGS *Sir William Alexander* not only made up for the non-availability of a navy ship with heavy-lift capability but also did noble service restoring aids to navigation.

to their units to prepare gear, load stores and to make the ships technically and mechanically ready to deploy for an expected 30-day period.

There was ambiguity and uncertainty about conditions and requirements on the ground in the Gulf Coast area in the early stages of planning. We did not know the command structure being used by the United States, so liaison officers within Second Fleet and Northern Command were asked to make contact and confirm details. Internet and television news reports were used to develop an appreciation for the situation in the mission area. As it was not known what roles the task force (TF) would be requested to perform, there was the potential for hundreds of possible tasks. Thus planning commenced without having all the answers, and this required an extremely flexible approach.

Naval ships were assigned to the TF based on readiness levels and availability. Not having the support ship HMCS *Preserver* available resulted in a lack of both heavy lift and refuelling capabilities. This affected our ability to transport large quantities of construction materials and other heavy stores and had a critical impact on self-sus-



Ships of the Canadian Navy Task Group refuelling from the USNS Patuxent en route to the Gulf of Mexico. Not having the AOR, HMCS Preserver, available made the US Navy's help necessary.

tainability. Although heavy lift concerns were somewhat offset by the assignment of *Sir William Alexander* to the TF, it did not resolve the sustainability issue. Refuelling at sea would have to be done by US vessels that serviced the eastern seaboard.

This was the first joint operation in which a Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) vessel was placed under the operational control of the navy. To ensure integration into the TF, naval staff embarked in *Sir William Alexander* to provide an overview of the military aspects of the operation and to maintain communication by installing and operating military cryptographic and communications equipment.

Helicopters were a necessary and indispensable asset for the operation, given the vast number of possible tasks and the flexibility they provided. The challenge for the air force was to provide three Sea King helicopters and sufficient personnel to support the operation while maintaining the ability to sustain operations at home and to plan for “follow-on” forces in the Gulf of Mexico if required. The TF's flexibility was expanded with the *Alexander's* embarked BO-105 – a small yet versatile helicopter with an experienced pilot.

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We would not have been ready to sail on such short notice had it not been for the efforts of many people ashore, both civilian and military. A huge effort was necessary to get Canada's contribution ready on such short notice, including a call for personnel and supplies, assistance from local merchants, and procuring, packaging, organizing and preparing the ships to sail over a holiday weekend.

The Transit

The task group (TG), the naval component of the whole TF, left Halifax for the Gulf of Mexico on the afternoon of 6 September 2005. During the 2,500 nautical mile transit the ships conducted preparatory training in a variety of areas such as first aid, critical incident stress management, small boat and radio familiarization, as well as holding briefings on potential safety hazards. Soon after leaving Halifax, the TG refuelled from the USNS *Patuxent*, which was en route to Gulf of Mexico to support



Photo: DND Combat Camera.

A Canadian Dive Team working under difficult conditions amid the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina.

US Navy ships. *Patuxent* transited in company with the TG, conducting replenishments at sea to ensure that the Canadian ships had sufficient fuel to conduct sustained operations on arrival.

The transit was not without incident. Hurricane Ophelia, a category II hurricane, was deemed a potential threat, and approximately four days after departing, the decision was made to change the TG's course to the east to avoid it. The detour added approximately 12 hours to the planned arrival time, but ensured the safety of the ships. Because of *Sir William Alexander's* delayed departure from Halifax and her approximately seven knot slower speed during the transit south, she slowly fell astern of the TG but was able to maintain communications due to the embarked military communications equipment and personnel.

On Arrival

Canada's first contribution on the ground in Louisiana and Mississippi was the Composite Dive Team (CDT), led by Lieutenant (N) Rollie Leyte. This team, made up of 17 members of Fleet Diving Unit (FDU) Atlantic, 18 members of FDU Pacific, and five members of 4ESR, left Canada on 5 September on a Hercules flight to Pensacola Naval Air Station, and initially set up their base of operations at the Naval Station Pascagoula. Later they moved to the NASA Booster Repair Facility in Michoud, on the outskirts of New Orleans.

On arrival, they immediately set to work and joined up with US Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit Two (MDSU2) to commence diving operations. The integration with MDSU2 was instantaneous and seamless due to long-standing relationships and similar work – the same reason the integration of the joint capability within the



Photo: US Navy (website).

USS *Bataan* provided support to the Canadians during *Operation Unison* – some of this support would have been available had HMCS *Preserver* sailed with the task group.

CDT itself was also effortless. Canadian divers were the first in the waters around the Louisiana coastline and were tasked to clear underwater obstructions and jetties, recover navigation aids and re-open navigable sea routes along the Gulf Coast.

A key to mission success was the establishment of the Forward Logistics Site (FLS) in Pensacola on 9 September under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Anthony Thys. This ensured that logistic support and sustainment of the operation were coordinated. FLS members also commenced liaison with the American emergency assistance agency (FEMA) distribution pipeline and US counterparts to ensure that Canadian relief supplies made it to where they were most needed in a expeditious manner.

The TG (less *Sir William Alexander*) arrived in Pensacola, Florida, 12 September and commenced offloading humanitarian relief stores and construction materials. In a matter of hours the majority of the supplies were landed and the ships proceeded to an anchorage 18 nm south of Gulfport/Biloxi, Mississippi, adjacent to the USS *Bataan*, an amphibious warship with helicopter and landing craft utility (LCU) capabilities. The distant anchorage for the TG was necessary as there were no accessible ports due to massive damage to infrastructure, sunken vessels and other underwater obstructions closer to shore. The Naval Construction Troop and Combat Assault Boat Team, who were also engineers, disembarked from *Toronto* upon arrival Pensacola and immediately proceeded to Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, where they readily integrated with the US Navy's Construction Battalion (SeaBees) to form the Composite Construction Engineering Group

(CCEG). The CCEG conducted clean-up efforts in the Bay St Louis/Gulfport region and constructed numerous temporary relief distribution centres.

Sir William Alexander arrived in Pensacola 14 September and immediately proceeded to offload heavy construction materials and other relief supplies, remaining alongside until the 16th. On receiving an official tasking request for the services of the *Alexander* from

the US Coast Guard, tactical control of the Canadian vessel was transferred from Commodore McFadden to the US Coast Guard so she could commence the important work of restoring safe navigation to area waterways through the restoration of navigation and Ocean Data Acquisition System (ODAS) buoys.

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Once at anchor, ships' companies in the TG were organized into daily work parties consisting of approximately 100 people from each ship. Two ships would provide work parties each day to allow the crews the ability to continue at-sea operations and daily routines. Transporting these eager and capable sailors 18 nm to shore could have greatly limited the contribution as well as the morale of those proceeding ashore to do the work. However, the support of the USS *Bataan* and USN large landing craft to transport all Canadian sailors ashore greatly facilitated the task, which otherwise would have required a frigate to transit part of the distance past unknown underwater hazards to send personnel ashore via rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs). The work parties did a great deal of work in a very short period of time, conducting clean up of debris at schools, a library, a retirement home (the Armed Forces Retirement Center), and a sports stadium which was planned to be utilized as a distribution centre.



A Canadian combat diver at work during **Operation Unison**. Canadian divers had life-support systems that enabled them to work in polluted waters.

The Transition Phase

Within a week of Hurricane Katrina, tremendous progress had been made in the rescue of stranded residents and other relief efforts to the point where the situation was no longer deemed a state of emergency. The US military began withdrawal of forces as state and local authorities assumed greater roles. That included the departure of USS *Bataan* and the loss of LCU support on 17 September. These factors influenced the decision to withdraw the naval TG from the Gulf region, as only assistance of the CDT and CCEG would be required. On 18 September Commander Richard Gravel assumed command of the National Command Element, which was established to lead the remaining operations by the CDT and CCEG. He also assumed operational control of *Sir William Alexander*, having support of liaison officers from medical, logistical (in Pensacola) and diving sections, as well as the army and CCG. The TG (less *Alexander*) disembarked augmented personnel, embarked those required for normal naval TG sailing operations, and then sailed out of the Gulf of Mexico to avoid the storm that later became Hurricane Rita.

Having safely evaded yet another hurricane, Commodore McFadden continued to monitor Rita's path knowing full well the fragility of the Gulf Coast area in the vicinity of New Orleans. On 21 September, Commodore McFadden transferred with his TG Staff to *Toronto* and released *Athabaskan* from the TG to continue with preparations for her winter employment. He then ordered *Toronto* and *Ville de Quebec* into Mayport contingent on the impact of Hurricane Rita. On 23 September, after Rita's impact was predicted to be minimal, Commodore McFadden decided that the TG was no longer required and ordered the ships back to Halifax.

Assessment of Operation Unison

Operation Unison was successful in its aim to provide timely transport of relief supplies and humanitarian aid to the Gulf Coast region. Furthermore, the CF again demonstrated its ability to integrate seamlessly with US forces, as a result of close ties and continuous participation in multinational exercises and operations around the world. And while there have been numerous issues identified from this first JTFA joint operation, the lessons learned in initial planning, organization and capability have been tallied and will be applied to future JTFA operations.

Operation Unison was a prime example of the Chief of Defence Staff's concept for joint operations and the future of the CF. The Gulf Coast disaster can be compared to the situation in a failed or failing state, with a breakdown in civil society and limited infrastructure and resources. The lack of Canadian capability for the efficient and effective inshore transport would have been a serious limiting factor in this operation, however this was mitigated by the presence of the USS *Bataan* and embarked landing craft capabilities. The operation highlighted the need for a Canadian amphibious capability, including a flight deck and well deck, in order to provide the maximum flexibility and capability for both helicopter and ground/troop transport operations for self-sustainment in such operations.

Any natural disaster in Canada or abroad could have an impact similar to Hurricane Katrina. Instability and upheaval, whether as a result of natural causes, terrorism or conflict, illustrate a requirement for a self-sustaining amphibious capability. 🇨🇦

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