

Naval Boarding Party Operations

PO1 Peter Augustus

One of the primary roles of the navy during operational deployments in recent years has been maritime interdiction operations (MIOs). MIOs involve “the surveillance, interception and, if necessary, boarding of commercial vessels to verify, re-direct or impound their cargoes in support of the enforcement of economic sanctions.”¹

The ever-changing dynamics of today’s world, coupled with existing threats, reinforces the need to ensure security on the high seas as well as coastal areas. It is evident that there is a need to train and deploy a highly effective and capable boarding party – an extension of force from its parent ship – to ensure that weapons or terrorists are not being smuggled to locations where they will do harm. While these are the principal missions of the naval boarding parties in the current MIO environment, many other tasks are possible.

Naval boarding parties (NBP) are not a new concept. They date back to the days of sail when vessels would engage in a broadside gun battle designed to disable the other ship so that a boarding party and prize crew armed with cutlasses and flintlock pistols could capture and control the enemy vessel. Since those days, the team has evolved into a select group of highly trained and disciplined personnel with the necessary skills, knowledge, leadership and rules of engagement to ensure effectiveness in conducting maritime interdiction operations.

NBP Training and Operational Experience

The Naval Boarding Party Basic Course is an 18-day training course required by all those performing NBP duties, including officers and petty officers. All students are instructed on various aspects of boarding procedures and strong emphasis is placed on personal conditioning and weapons proficiency, and most importantly, on safety. Students receive live hands-on training in proper weapons handling, use of force, container inspections, rappelling, tactical search and sweep procedures, lectures on ship safety and hazardous material awareness. During basic NBP course, students are instructed on the various weapon policies and operational states. Each state reflects the immediate threat level and the preparedness for the use of force.

The operational states are:

- OPS Green
- OPS Yellow
- OPS Red



Photo: Master Corporal Doucet, Formation Imaging Atlantic.

RHIBs are the primary means of transportation for a naval boarding party.

OPS Red has the highest weapons policy. It can only be initiated by the Boarding Party Team Commander (A1), or by the ship’s Captain. All weapons are loaded and ready for use at all times. Emergency breakaway is the executive order by A1 to evacuate the ship by the quickest means.

The Naval Boarding Party Supervisor Course is an additional eight-day course, which provides boarding party supervisors (officers, petty officers) with the necessary instruction to execute continuous training exercises. This includes orders, communications and search plans, intelligence gathering, examining ship’s documentation, legal aspects and liaising with command, as well as leading a boarding party in conducting actual boardings.

The Naval Boarding Party Team training is a five-day course, which works-up a ship’s existing boarding party team into a cohesive and effective unit. The team receives refresher training and is then monitored and assessed during numerous boarding and jetty exercises that provide diverse opportunities to challenge the team and provide reality-based training. Each member re-qualifies on the various weapons used during boarding operations.

During numerous operations abroad, NBP teams have boarded foreign vessels in varied states of repair, which has complicated operations because of safety issues. Teams are often subjected to health, safety and hygiene standards well below our own maritime standards. For example, it is common to find vessels in the Middle East carrying large numbers of livestock to Gulf states.



Not always an easy job! A Canadian naval boarding party begins to board a tanker.

When deployed, most NBP teams carry out daily training to hone their skills and to maintain a high operational readiness. This training incorporates live tactical shooting with the Sig Sauer pistol, MP5 machine pistol and R870 shotgun. Close encounter techniques are practiced, such as the tactical baton, ‘empty hand control’ and mechanical restraints (handcuffing).

Physical fitness is very important in such a demanding environment and therefore PT is regularly scheduled. Some ships’ teams have carried out such training during the forenoon and then work for their department during the afternoon. These schedules allow NBP members to continue to conduct the fitness training necessary to maintain a high standard as well as continue to enhance their trade skills.

Deployment Scenario

Prior to a team being deployed to a vessel of interest there are a number of behind-the-scenes steps that are essential to ensure the safety of the team.

A standard courtesy hailing is conducted to assess the threat and the likelihood of a boarding. Once it is determined that an inspection is required and the ship’s Captain is confident the team can deploy safely, the ship is brought to boarding stations. This brings the ship’s team and weapons to a heightened state of readiness.

Within 30 minutes the team should be dressed (dark blue coveralls, with tactical vest or belt and upper body armour, tactical helmets, baton, handcuffs and personal weapons: all carry a Sig Sauer 9mm pistol and either an MP5 machine pistol or tactical shotgun) and briefed, ready to board the vessel of interest. Once on board with the crew safely



Members of HMCS Algonquin’s boarding party exercising.

secured, the boarding party officer makes an assessment of the situation and prepares to carry out his mission. This could range from a documentation search through to full search and seizure of the vessel.

The Way Ahead

While the role of the modern NBP has not changed significantly in the last several years, advancements in equipment and tactics have necessitated changes in how training and operations are conducted. The procurement of new equipment and training support systems allows for the most realistic training possible. Some of the updates in training we expect to implement in the next year are:

- use of simulated ammunition (‘simmunition’) to allow for reality-based weapons training in a controlled environment using scenario-based training;
- expansion of rappel training;
- acquisition of a trainer simulating a shipboard environment for both weapons and search tactics training;
- inclusion of ‘conduct after capture’ training; and
- inclusion of training on the handling of detainees.

NBP teams currently deployed throughout the fleet are better trained and equipped than ever. They are more than capable of executing critical maritime interdiction operations. Operational feedback remains essential and to date has provided positive information. Canadian teams are able to execute fundamental skills on the world stage, establishing Canada as one of the leaders in boarding party operations. 🇨🇦

Assistant Editor’s note: Readers may remember the incident in March 2007 in the Persian Gulf, in which a Royal Navy boarding party was captured by Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces. There are a number of lessons to be learned from that experience, but an obvious conclusion is that the parent vessel must remain near its deployed boarding party so that the ship can provide support if that becomes necessary. As a matter of policy, Canadian warships remain close for mutual support and have done so for many years.

Notes

1. *Leadmark, The Navy’s Strategy for 2020*, Directorate of Maritime Strategy, 2001.

PO1 Peter Augustus is Senior Naval Boarding Party Instructor at the CF Naval Operations School.