Laying the Groundwork for Success: Forward Logistics and Operation Altair

Lieutenant-Commander Dave Colbourne

To the casual onlooker it may seem that participating in a naval mission means simply loading the ships and sailing off into the sunset. But there are many things that must be done to support and sustain the ships after they leave harbour in Canada. Who arranges for parts and supplies to be sent to the ships, including navigating Customs regulations in various countries? How are port visits arranged? Who arranges for any maintenance contracts? Who arranges for rest and relaxation opportunities for the crews? How can a crew member get home expeditiously if there is an emergency? All this and more is the work of the forward logistics people in the Canadian Forces. Without their work to prepare and supply the forces, Canadian missions would not be as successful. The value added by the forward logistics team to a task group is immeasurable. In this article I will discuss the role the forward logistics site (FLS) personnel played in Operation Altair Rotation 4 and the vital logistical support they provided to this successful operation. This particular example involved coordinating logistics support for four ships, over 1,000 sailors, four major maintenance periods, unforecasted port visits, and ports not visited in over 40 years, if at all.

Forward logistics planning and organization is not something new for the Canadian Navy; it has been applied since the Korean War and has undergone modifications throughout operations outside Canada since 1950. Most recently, FLS operational support has been maintained in the Arabian Sea area since 2001 with Operation Apollo and Operation Altair demonstrating Canada’s presence in the region and commitment to the war on terrorism. Throughout this period, the work undertaken by forward logistics organizers has continued to support operations by making logistical arrangements for units at sea.

Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150), operates in the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and the northwest part of the Indian Ocean. Its primary activity is the conduct of maritime security operations, and in particular protection of shipping from piracy. CTF 150 is one of three multinational coalition fleets coordinated with the US Navy’s 5th Fleet. Canada’s contribution to this effort is known as Operation Altair which supports Operation Enduring Freedom. The operation began in July 2004. For Rotation 4 of this operation, which commenced in April 2008, Canada was given the responsibility of leading CTF 150. The Canadian contribution to Rotation 4 began with a three ship task group that included two ships from Esquimalt (HMC Ships Protecteur and Calgary) and another from Halifax (the command ship HMCS Iroquois) before being joined by another Halifax-based vessel (HMCS Ville de Quebec).

The deployment took the forward logistics team to ports such as Split (Croatia), Aqaba (Jordan), Djibouti, Jebel Ali (United Arab Emirates), Muscat (Oman), Karachi (Pakistan), Mombasa, (Kenya), Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania), Chennai (India), Port Klang (Malaysia), Tokyo (Japan), Pussan (South Korea), Manama (Bahrain), Piraeus (Greece) and Civitavecchia (Italy) between the months of May and October 2008.

The size of the FLS team ranged from six people during the initial transit into theatre to its peak of 21 people after HMCS Ville de Quebec joined the task group in August 2008 to conduct escort duties for United Nations World Food Program vessels carrying humanitarian goods to Somalia from Mombasa. The team was led by a Lieutenant-Commander Sea Logistics Officer and also included logistics officers, supply technicians, traffic technicians, military police, naval communicators, resource...
management support clerks, engineering technicians and a medical technician.

For Operation Altair, as for every mission, the forward logistics team was responsible for a number of tasks. First, it arranged port visits. Second, it arranged storage and transfer of parts and material. Third, it expedited transfer of material and people through Customs when necessary. Fourth, it helped arrange repair and maintenance visits. Fifth, it arranged and organized show tours to entertain CF personnel and/or local guests. Sixth, the forward logistics team was important in coordinating replenishment at sea for the task group. And finally, the team was responsible for making arrangements for sailors who were joining a ship mid-deployment or being repatriated for some compelling reason. Let us discuss each of these.

In almost all cases the FLS team visits ports ahead of the ships to meet with local port authorities, ship chandlers and security personnel. Following the reconnaissance visit, a detailed report is submitted to the visiting ships providing information such as port authority contact information, security requirements and emergency contact information. Additionally, the forward logistics team works with port authorities to negotiate the best possible berth in the ports in order for the task group to achieve its goals during the port visit, whether the goals are maintenance, public relations, or facilitating rest and recreation opportunities for the ships’ crew. This preliminary work is most valuable as in some cases, the port authorities have erroneous ship dimension information. In this case local authorities were planning to assign berths to Protecteur and Calgary that could not accommodate them in terms of the depth required. Even though the East Coast Navy has Standing Offer Agreements (SOA) in place with ship chandlers, a naval presence on the ground is of huge importance to ensure the requirements of a warship are understood and therefore satisfied.

In making preparations for port visits in Jebel Ali (UAE), the forward logistics team faced numerous challenges in securing a berth for ships. Commercial shipping traffic is much more lucrative for port authorities and container ships have the priority, not only for the most functional berths, but for any berth for a period greater than 24 hours. Ships, especially military ships, often spend hours or even days at anchor outside the port awaiting jetty assignment from the port authority. Only through working closely with the ship’s agent, the FLS leadership was able to secure jetty assignment a day before the scheduled port visit. To accomplish this, the team emphasized the importance of securing a berth early so that security arrangements could begin. This could only be accomplished through face-to-face interaction. Without logistics personnel there in person ahead of time, the ship(s) would have been left in the harbour for an extended period awaiting a jetty assignment which could have negatively affected the ship’s company morale (through a shorter port visit) or the operational effectiveness of the mission, or both.

A three-ship task group sailing with three classes of ships, two of which are over 35 years old, creates challenges in maintenance and delivery of essential parts. In the case of Operation Altair, operational deficiencies became routine and parts were entering theatre regularly via military aircraft and commercial means. There were at least three shipments weekly being flown into theatre either via commercial carrier that would arrive in Dubai and require a complex Customs clearance procedure, or via Canadian Forces service flight directly into Camp Mirage in the UAE. Shipments ranged in size from a few boxes to several pallets.
FLS headquarters was in Camp Mirage. The camp was 45 minutes to Jebel Ali, 30 minutes to the Dubai airport, 30 minutes to Dubai and 1 hour and 45 minutes to the port of Fujairah (UAE). It was a small camp, but it was able to accommodate the influx of 20 personnel for the 3½ months that the team was in the region. The camp’s infrastructure was satisfactory to accommodate and feed personnel as well as provide technology support. It also had excess capacity to accommodate transients entering and leaving theatre from the task group. The camp was also ideal for the morale and welfare of CF personnel as it housed a small gym, welfare phones, commercial internet, as well as a mini theatre and access to Canadian Forces Radio and Television (CFRT).

It was not practical to store spare parts in the open air at Camp Mirage, where they would be exposed to high heat, high humidity and constant blowing sand. This meant that a warehouse had to be leased in Jebel Ali, the port where the task group ships would visit in order to conduct their rest and maintenance periods (RAMPs). Access to the warehouse was restricted to forward logistics team members, and port access was restricted to people with authority to enter. Not only was the warehouse used to store goods shipped from Canada, it was also used to store locally procured items that the logistics personnel purchased on behalf of the units. It also served as a holding location for the Canadian Forces Personnel Support Agency (CFPSA) Show Tour sound equipment and return stores. Stores were generally held in the warehouse for up to 10 days while awaiting the opportunity to deliver them to vessels either at the next port of call or via a launch. A launch meant a delivery at sea, in which a small vessel was used to carry rations and spare parts (up to 25 pallets) from the launch point (normally Fujairah (UAE)) to a predetermined rendezvous point at sea.

Customs clearance procedures produced some of the biggest challenges in the host state for the task group. UAE government offices close for the weekend on Thursday early afternoon and re-open on Sunday. In order to get goods to clear Customs and be available for delivery to ships or to be stored in the FLS warehouse, paperwork had to be submitted to Customs by Tuesday afternoon or Wednesday morning at the latest. Otherwise, it would be after the weekend before the goods would be released to the navy. A complex process was put in place to expedite clearances to a 24-36 hour period. The Canadian Defence Attaché (CDA) office in Abu Dhabi provided support to the FLS efforts to clear shipments as expeditiously as possible. The challenge with the CDA office was that it had very limited resources available to assist, so could only help by faxing clearance forms and shipment details to the Customs Officers of the host state. This was a critical step in the process as the host state would only communicate with the Canadian Embassy or CDA personnel. Fortunately, a Canadian Operations Support Command (CANOSCOM) intermediate staging team (IST) was located in Fujairah concurrently with Operation Altair and was forwarding equipment and vehicles from Canada to Afghanistan and vice versa. The IST placed a clerk at the Canadian Embassy in Abu Dhabi who had expertise in processing Customs clearance requests and this streamlined the process, ensuring goods arriving from Canada cleared Customs quickly and the equipment could continue its route to Afghanistan. This clerk was employed in Abu Dhabi until early July 2008 and was able to assist the forward logistics team with shipments for the task group as well. After the clerk had been transferred, the team occasionally deployed personnel to Abu Dhabi to continue the smooth clearance process.

Each of the three ships participating in this rotation of Operation Altair conducted a 10-day rest and maintenance period in Jebel Ali. This was quickly established as the ideal port for rest and especially maintenance because of the access to trades people and their ability to perform many maintenance and repairs so that the task group could carry on with the mission. The forward logistics team had two engineering experts, a marine systems engineer and a combat systems engineer. They were instrumental in successful maintenance periods as they provided an expert review of the Statements of Work. Further, they had established a working relationship with many of the contractors carrying out the work. This relationship enabled the FLS engineers to clarify the requirements of the vessel before arrival so that there would be no confusion and the work could be performed to specifications. Additionally, they conducted quality control inspections and ensured the work was in accordance with the contract.

During the rest and maintenance periods, CFPSA had arranged for show tours to entertain the sailors. Because of a heightened threat level in the region at the time, safety was a greater concern than usual. Neither ships’ organiz-
ers nor CFPSA were in a position where they could locate and coordinate a venue for the show. This meant that forward logistics staff conducted reconnaissance visits in the vicinity and secured a venue that was not only an ideal location for a small concert, but also a locale with sufficient security. By the end of the deployment, three shows had been conducted for nearly 1,000 Canadian sailors in the UAE desert. FLS staff carried out all logistical support for the show tour including securing accommodations for the performers, performer ground transportation, ship personnel transportation, and storage, delivery, set up, tear down and return transportation to Canada of sound equipment.

Although the task group units were operating under the command of CTF 150, they were normally operating independent of each other – that is, they were patrolling different areas of the region as directed by the Commander of CTF 150. They infrequently came alongside ports in the Gulf region and therefore required re-provisioning at sea. The forward logistics personnel were essential in coordinating these replenishments at sea, liaising directly with the ships, ration chandlers and the company providing the transportation of launches to the rendezvous point. Because timing was critical to the CTF 150 units, the FLS team made sure that rations arrived on time and launches would be loaded in time to meet the ships, often early in the morning because of the extreme heat in the region and the adverse effect the sun had on fresh rations. Rendezvous timings were regularly before 0900, approximately 15 miles offshore, meaning launches had to leave Fujairah by 0630. Launches were loaded at 0400 in 30 degree temperatures by contracted agents and FLS staff. FLS personnel always accompanied a launch to act as a sentry for the rations and supplies and met with ships’ Logistics Officers to review any additional logistical issues.

One other key function performed by the FLS was transient personnel management. Transients are defined as any sailors either joining a ship mid-deployment or being repatriated for compassionate, administrative, or disciplinary reasons. Transients also include personnel arriving from Canada to conduct technical assistance visits. In every instance, the forward logistics team coordinated pick up or drop off at the airport, commercial accommodations (if required), transportation to the ship, and passage through Customs/Immigration. Technical assistance visits involved large groups during the maintenance periods as teams from the Fleet Maintenance Facilities (Cape Breton/Cape Scott) flew into theatre to perform specialized essential maintenance. Throughout the deployment, over 450 personnel were moved from one place to another – and the FLS team was there for every one.

This capability was an indispensable one. It is very helpful – particularly for young sailors joining their unit for the first time – to have a Canadian naval representative at the airport to ensure they reach their final destination on time. In one instance, a Petty Officer had to be repatriated to Victoria for compassionate reasons while operating off the southern coast of Oman. Fortunately, a UK ship within the task group was able to transport him by helicopter to Salalah, Oman. The forward logistics team sent two members to Salalah within eight hours of being notified of the situation. The two FLS members arrived about two hours before the distraught sailor, and
met him as he disembarked the helicopter. They then took control of him, facilitated a phone call to his family, and escorted him back to the Dubai airport, from where they had arranged a flight for his trip home.

The addition of the fourth ship to the task group was particularly challenging for the FLS team. The team was tasked to support yet another unit with only one additional person. HMCS Ville de Quebec joined the task group in early August 2008 and was to conduct escort duties in support of the World Food Program. The challenge for the logistics team to support this vessel was that she would not be operating in the same region. The other three vessels were, for the most part, conducting operations in the seas near Oman, UAE and Djibouti. Ville de Quebec was to conduct escort duties much further south, off the coast of Kenya and Somalia. This meant re-provisioning and refueling from the port of Mombasa in Kenya. The FLS team organized a small detachment to support Ville de Quebec. A reconnaissance mission 10 days prior to the first expected port visit revealed that Mombasa could quite capably host the ship and provide the essentials, including fresh produce, bread and dairy products. Security was adequate and most typical port services, while costly, were available. Mombasa was a suitable port to aid in a vessel sustaining operations in that region.

**Conclusions**

The inclusion of a forward logistics team to any major deployment will remain critical to the successful accomplishment of the mission. Working with governments, agencies and contractors outside of North America is far more effective when done in person. This allows the Canadian Navy to communicate personally with relevant people in order to stress the importance of requirements and to foster a better appreciation for logistical support. Engagement of the forward logistics team to act on behalf of ships expedites jetty assignment, improves port services and increases the likelihood of successful port visits. Without logistics experts there ahead of time arranging matters, accomplishing the goals of replenishing fuel, rations and spares as well as recharging the crew’s batteries by facilitating a well-deserved rest period is far more difficult.

**Lieutenant-Commander Dave Colbourne** is a Logistics Officer currently working as Staff Officer Naval Supply Operations at Allied Maritime Command Headquarters Northwood in the United Kingdom. He has completed tours as Supply Officer in HMCS Preserver and Charlottetown.