Marking the 35th Anniversary of the Gulf War

Sharon Hobson and Duncan (Dusty) Miller

Given recent events in the Middle East, it is more important than ever to remember the events of the recent past in the region. The year 2026 marks the 35th anniversary of the Gulf War. The war was triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait at the beginning of August 1990. In response, the United Nations Security Council passed a series of resolutions condemning the invasion and calling for Iraq to withdraw – it did not. This resulted in the formation of a coalition of states, led by the United States, to force Iraq to withdraw. Included in this coalition was Canada. This article traces the origins of the war, and the Royal Canadian Navy's (RCN) participation in it – co-written by one of the RCN participants. A slightly revised version of this article will appear as the introduction to the new edition of the book ***The Persian Excursion*** *– renamed* ***Canada's Navy in the First Gulf War*** *– to be published this fall.*

Iraq's decision to invade Kuwait in August 1990 should not have been a surprise. At the end of the 1980-88 war between Iraq and Iran, Iraq found itself heavily in debt to Kuwait and other gulf states. Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein asked them to forgive the debt but they refused. Hussein had additional issues with Kuwait, among them a territorial dispute, an accusation that Kuwait was engaging in diagonal drilling under the border and stealing oil from Iraq's Rumaila oilfield, and the lure of Kuwait's substantial oil reserves and seaports. Feeling confident of success with an armed force considered the fifth largest in the world, Saddam Hussein made the decision to invade.

This decision was partly based on his assessment that the United States and others would not oppose him. He had already positioned an invasion force on Iraq's southern border and the international community had not shown any great concern about this. In fact, most countries viewed the Iraqi threat as just another phase in ongoing Middle East struggles warranting little more than symbolic gestures of response. To that effect, at the end of July, the US Navy (USN) engaged in joint exercises in the gulf with warships of the United Arab Emirates, and the USS *Independence* carrier battle group was directed to the region, with the expectation that a limited show of force by the West would be sufficient to deter any aggressive moves by Iraq.

It didn't. On the night of 1-2 August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait and by noon on the 2nd it had essentially taken control of the country and 10% of the world's proven oil reserves.

The war-hardened Iraqi military was a formidable force, one million strong, with 5,000 battle tanks, 10,000 other armoured vehicles, 4,000 artillery pieces, 700 combat aircraft, and anti-ship missiles. In addition, Iraq had stockpiles of chemical weapons, as well as development programs for biological and nuclear weapons, all of which could be delivered by modified Soviet Scud missiles.

Credit: Dusty Miller

Duncan (Dusty) Miller in the Persian Gulf in Command of the Allied Coalition/ Combat Logistic Force of some 60 ships.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) immediately went into emergency session and on 2 August unanimously passed Resolution 660 which condemned the invasion and called for both an immediate Iraqi withdrawal and negotiations between Kuwait and Iraq to resolve their dispute. (UNSC member Yemen abstained.) The Arab states reassured an anxious United States that once things calmed down, the two countries would be able to settle their differences, most likely by Kuwait conceding some border oilfields as well as two strategically placed islands, Warbah and Bubiyan, at the head of the Persian Gulf.

Iraq did not respond to the UN demand to withdraw from Kuwait. Instead it increased its invasion force from 100,000 men to more than 200,000, and had its military take up positions near the Saudi border, which raised the question of whether it was defending its territorial gains or preparing for further aggression. Given the possible threat to Saudi Arabia which in 1991 had 20% of the

world's proven oil reserves, the United States and United Kingdom began putting together a coalition of countries prepared to counter the Iraqi forces.

With Iraq not responding to the UN demand that it withdraw from Kuwait, on 6 August the Security Council passed Resolution 661 which imposed economic sanctions on Iraq with military enforcement and allowed for the use of force to evict it from Kuwait if it had not withdrawn its troops by 15 January 1991. Of the 15 Security Council members, only Cuba and Yemen abstained.

After Resolution 661 was passed, Canada was one of the first countries to step forward with an offer of military forces but there was much discussion behind the scenes on what form that offer would take. After consultation with his senior officials, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney made the formal announcement on 10 August that Canada's contribution to an international force to monitor the economic sanctions would be a naval task group. A month later, a squadron of CF-18 fighter aircraft was added to provide air cover. By clearly indicating that the military contribution was in support of UN Resolution 665[1] which authorized the use of force, the Canadian ships remained outside the American command structure and kept Canada involved in any operational decisions.[2]

The three ships chosen to help enforce the UN embargo against Iraq – the *Tribal*-class destroyer HMCS *Athabaskan*, the Improved *Restigouche*-class frigate HMCS *Terra Nova*, and the Auxiliary Oiler Replenishment ship HMCS *Protecteur* – were all based in Halifax and had undergone preparations for exercises and operational deployment. They were not, however, ready for combat operations in the Persian Gulf, an area where they had never operated. For that mission, they would need to be outfitted with modern weapons and sensor systems, and they needed them all fitted in less than two weeks – work that would normally have taken at least six months.

Fortunately, much of the required equipment was already under contract in preparation for fitting on the new *Halifax*-class frigates being built to replace the navy's aged steam-driven destroyers (including *Terra Nova*). It was a matter of speeding up delivery and redirecting the equipment to the ships going to the gulf and then having the shipyard personnel work around the clock to fit the new equipment into the old ships. The new equipment included air defence sensors, chaff, missiles and guns (including two 1940s-vintage Bofors guns which had been in storage since the 1980s), as well as anti-ship guns and missiles. Because of the danger of mines in the gulf, all the ships were fitted with mine countermeasures equipment, and *Athabaskan* received new engines. The five Sea King helicopters accompanying the ships had their anti-submarine warfare equipment removed and were modified with multiple new sensors and a door-mounted machine gun for a surface surveillance role.

It was all a massive undertaking made possible by the dedication and hard work of the dockyard workers. Captain (Navy) (at the time) Duncan (Dusty) Miller recalls visiting the dockyard and witnessing that single-minded industriousness first hand. He approached a worker helping to fit the Phalanx close-in weapon system on the quarterdeck of *Athabaskan* and asked how things were going. He was told,

> It's going just fine. There's 267 little contacts that I have to solder here. Each of them has a little different colour wire on it and I have to put the little different colour wire on the little solder that belongs to that wire and I'm not allowed to get them mixed up. And I'd be doing a whole bunch better if I wasn't talking to you, Sir.

Acquiring and fitting the new equipment was only part of the challenge in preparing the ships and helicopters for their deployment. The crews and operations teams had to

Credit: Andrew Thomas, Flickr

*HMCS **Athabaskan** departs Halifax for the Persian Gulf, August 1990.*

Credit: Department of National Defence

Canadian CF-18 in Qatar readying for take-off in April 1991.

learn how to maintain it and use it once in theatre. That process started with the Maritime Warfare Centre and the Fleet School putting the squadron staff and equipment through every scenario they thought the task group might encounter in the gulf.

The task group left Halifax on 24 August 1990 under the command of Commodore Ken Summers, and with the codename *Operation Friction*. The preparations and training continued en route with HMCS *Fraser* accompanying the ships as far as Gibraltar, providing targets for weapons drills, acting as a merchant vessel for boarding operations, and undertaking surprise attacks on the task group to test readiness and responses. Canada's allies also provided invaluable support. The UK held special briefings for the Canadian ships in Gibraltar; France provided practice for defending against the Iraqi Exocet air-to-surface missiles; and NATO provided the use of its underwater magnetic detection range in Augusta, Sicily. Each of the three ships ran this range to determine their own magnetic signatures, so they could then use their internal electronic cables to reduce them, in order to be better prepared for mines. However, the 24,385 tonne supply ship *Protecteur* still presented a target 50 per cent larger than *Athabaskan*, so the preferred tactic was never to sail the ship near a minefield!

With the task group's arrival in Bahrain, Commodore Ken Summers was appointed Commander Canadian Forces Middle East and moved ashore to establish a Joint Canadian Headquarters in Manamah, the capital of Bahrain, overseeing the Canadian contribution to the war effort. (In addition to the RCN's three ships, the Royal Canadian Air Force contributed 24 CF-18 fighter aircraft, and the Canadian Army provided personnel for security at land-based facilities and an Air Defence detachment onboard the ships, and provided 1 Canadian Field Hospital which was attached to a British army unit.) Command of the Naval Task Group was handed to Captain (Navy) Duncan (Dusty) Miller.

The task group began operations on 1 October in the Gulf of Oman as part of the Multinational Interception Force which was enforcing the UN embargo. This meant stopping merchant vessels proceeding to the northern gulf and inspecting their cargo to prevent any arms or military supplies going to the Iraqis in Kuwait.

Operating in the tense environment of the gulf required the crews to be on high alert. The Iraqi air force flew daily missions, practicing their air-to-surface targeting. Five or six Mirage aircraft would fly towards the Canadian ships, staying just out of range of their weapon systems. (The Iraqis flew five aircraft daily from early January on with a southerly pattern and this continued for several weeks.)

Credit: Department of National Defence

Canadian warships conduct replenishment at sea en route to the Persian Gulf. From left HMCS ***Athabaskan****,* ***Protecteur*** *and* ***Terra Nova****, September 1990.*

Credit: Library and Archives Canada

HMCS ***Protecteur*** *refuels USS* ***Wisconsin*** *during* ***Operation Friction****, 1990.*

Canada's rules of engagement required that the Canadian ships could only respond once missiles separated from the Iraqi aircraft: that left the ships with very few seconds in which to fire their defences.

This obviously created some tense moments – one of which was Canadian made. A CF-18 Captain asked permission to practice a low-level attack against the Canadian ships. The air controller relayed this request to the Task Group Commander, the three ships were warned of the intended friendly attack, and they confirmed their anti-air missile systems were set not to fire. The trusting CF-18s then performed an unarmed strafing run at each ship. Unfortunately, *Protecteur*'s engine room personnel were not aware this was happening and hurriedly called the bridge to determine if they were under attack! These were stressful times, but everyone recognized the need to practice warfighting skills and was grateful for the protection the CF-18s were providing.

In early 1991, as the world anxiously waited to see if Iraq would withdraw from Kuwait by the UN deadline of 15 January, the Canadian task group was moved to the central gulf in preparation for war with the Iraqis. Canada was given one of the three commands to coordinate the attacks – Command of the Allied Combat Logistics Force under Captain (N) Miller. The United States was given the other two commands – of the USN carriers, and of the attack cruisers and missile ships – both under the command of US Admirals.

When Miller took command of the Combat Logistics Force (CLF), he went from coordinating the movements of not three but 60 ships. The role of the CLF was to keep the front-line combatants supplied with fuel, ammunition and spare parts. Miller and his staff set up a convoy and escort system for all ships entering the gulf, similar to what RCN predecessors instituted during the Second World War, by dividing an area in the southern Persian Gulf into a grid whereby allied ships could move to a specific replenishment station and then be safely escorted to the carrier battle groups. Each square of the grid was identified by the name of a Canadian province and a number, making it clear to all participants that it was a Canadian-run operation.

With 12 navies participating in the operation, the communication needs were daunting. The Canadian task group was well prepared for this role. The RCN had fitted the code systems for secure communications with both the US Navy and Royal Navy (RN) ships. Incredibly, neither had the other's systems so they used the Canadians as a relay to be able to talk and pass secure information to each other. This meant the Canadian ships had all the plans and secure information from all three commands – no other allied ship had this comprehensive information. In addition, the crews of Canadian ships were made up of men and women from different ethnicities and backgrounds, resulting in an ability to converse with the different navies in their own language. This alone engendered trust and cooperation amongst the coalition ships.

When the CLF was moved further north in mid-February, Miller was given the additional responsibility for providing escorts for the carrier battle groups. The move closer to Iraq substantially increased the mine threat. When USS *Princeton* hit a mine off the coast of Kuwait in February, US Rear-Admiral Daniel P. March requested a Canadian ship with a helicopter and a good anti-mine capability to guide it through the minefields. Miller sent *Athabaskan* which had two helicopters, mine avoidance sonars and well-practiced damage control techniques.

In addition to mines, the Canadian ships were under threat from aircraft and missiles, and some came a little too close for comfort. In one instance an anti-ship missile

targeted for the RN's HMS *Gloucester* was shot down less than three kilometres away from *Athabaskan*.

The international force that aligned against Iraq pushed Iraqi military forces out of Kuwait and liberated the country, accomplishing its mission in just six weeks. By the time the war ended on 28 February 1991, the three Canadian ships – just 5% of the total multinational force – had carried out 25% of the enforcement of the UN sanctions. They had also proven the worth of a small, professional and competent navy in providing international security. Along the way, the task group pioneered the development of new operational capabilities. These included the development of boarding party procedures, and the rapid insertion of armed personnel by helicopter.[3]

Credit: CW02 Bailey, United States Navy

A crack runs through the superstructure of the Aegis cruiser USS ***Princeton*** *following a mine strike during* ***Operation Desert Storm****. Photographed 21 February, 1991. HMCS* ***Athabaskan*** *was requested to escort* ***Princeton*** *out of the mine field.*

Significantly, *Operation Friction* was a milestone for women in the Canadian military. It was the first time that women served in a combat role, as *Protecteur* had a mixed gender crew which included 35 women.

In mid-February 2001, President George W. Bush visited the NATO Headquarters in Norfolk, Virginia, where he received a briefing from Captain (N) Duncan Miller and USN Admiral Mike Mullen on how the 1990-91 Gulf War had been won so decidedly and so quickly. While technology had played a key role – short-range ship-launched laser-guided missiles were used for the first time, as was the Secure Telephone Unit 3 (STU 3) which provided secret encrypted communications with all US units, and the Global Positioning Satellite System was made available in the gulf 24/7 – NATO was able to show the President how the standardization of equipment and procedures in the allied navies as well as the joint operations of the countries' military forces provided an overwhelming warfighting capability. This was a major lesson from the Gulf War. This lesson may well need to be revisited by the present US administration.

Thirty-five years later, Miller is clear about why the 'Persian Excursion' was such a success. "As I think about what we accomplished, I know that it would not have been possible without the people we had recruited and trained over the years. Yes, technology is important and things like drones and AI may give us improved capabilities, but we couldn't have done what we did without the ingenuity, dedication and pride of the sailors, soldiers and air personnel. It always comes down to the people."

Today the men and women in the Canadian land, air and sea forces are competent and well trained. They are now equipped with much greater computer capabilities – in 1990 there was very little computer capability in the forces in the gulf, no iPhones and an analog computer in the Canadian command ship possessing only a 3K memory! There are plans to acquire new ships, vehicles, aircraft and drones, and a new Defence Investment Agency is being established to manage and speed up procurement. However, these plans are already behind schedule and will take years to implement. Meanwhile, there is one other important component of a fighting force that needs immediate and careful attention – people.

The Royal Canadian Navy currently has, and has had for a long time, a shortfall in personnel. That has resulted in understaffed ships and long deployments, adding stress to the lives of sailors. This has to be addressed. Attracting recruits requires the RCN to offer young people a way to make a difference in the world, and have a challenging,

Credit: Sailor 3rd Class Morgan Quintin, Canadian Armed Forces

*A CP-140 Aurora flies over HMCS **Moncton** and HMCS **Edmonton** during an event honouring the 35th anniversary of the end of the Persian Gulf War, in Halifax, 28 February 2026.*

exciting and rewarding career operating modern, hi-tech equipment as part of a fully staffed team. The camaraderie so necessary for teamwork in any profession is clearly evident in any of the Canadian Armed Forces units.

But we want to emphasize that there is a duty of care to these dedicated professionals that extends beyond the end of a conflict. The Canadian government has yet to recognize the 1990-91 Gulf War as a war. Without that recognition, the ship and aircraft crews are not recognized as war veterans. Because of that, personnel suffering medical disabilities as a result of the deployment are not eligible for certain pension and medical benefits, they are restricted in the wearing of the Kuwait Liberation Medal, and the Gulf War is not inscribed on national war memorials. In a December 2024 report, Parliament's Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs concluded that the Gulf War 1990-91 should be legislated by the government as a war and that more recognition was due to Persian Gulf veterans. At time of writing in winter 2026, that legislation has yet to be passed.

The RCN proved its worth in the Persian Gulf War and serves as a reminder of how quickly things can happen. The ships and aircraft were prepared expeditiously, the crews trained thoroughly, and both the enforcement and combat operations performed successfully. When the Persian Gulf War ended in 1991, the RCN had been a key part of the most successful joint operation in Canadian history. Over 5,100 air, land and sea personnel served in the war, did their jobs with bravery and dedication, and all came home. The three re-equipped, aging warships deployed in the gulf punched above their weight in operations and resulted in a RCN commander, for the first time since the Second World War, being put in charge of an international force. Unfortunately, most of what occurred took place in open water, far out of the public eye, with few first-hand reports of the action. What isn't seen is quickly forgotten.

We hope that when you read the details of the critical Canadian naval operations during the Gulf War you'll recognize their importance and the lessons we can take from them going forward.

Many thanks to Formac Publishing for agreeing to republish *The Persian Excursion: The Canadian Navy in the Gulf War* – renamed *Canada's Navy in the First Gulf War. A First-Hand Account* – in honour of the men and women who served in the war 35 years ago.

Notes

1. Resolution 665 was adopted on 25 August 1990. It demanded the immediate implementation of Resolutions 660, 661, 662 and 664, and authorized a naval blockade to enforce the embargo against Iraq.
2. It is interesting to compare the Canadian response in 1990-1991 to its response in 2003. The UN sanctions were a key aspect of the Canadian decision to participate in the international force in 1990-1991. Despite the American-British attempt in 2003 to persuade the UN Security Council of the necessity of acting to remove Iraq's (alleged) weapons of mass destruction, the UN refused to approve a resolution authorizing the use of force. Without UN approval, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's government, which had its doubts about the Iraqi threat, decided not to involve Canadian military forces directly. Canada did, however, provide ships to a coalition led by the United States in the northern Persian Gulf in support of the NATO forces in Afghanistan by conducting maritime interdiction operations to cut off terrorist escape and supply routes.
3. This rapid insertion capability came in handy when the Canadian government ordered the RCN forcibly to board GTS *Katie* in 2000 at the end of the war in Kosovo. The American cargo ship was carrying $200 million worth of Canadian military equipment and three Canadian army personnel, and its owners had been refusing to bring it into port until a dispute over money was settled. The navy landed 14 armed sailors on board the vessel and had two warships escort it into port.

Sharon Hobson was the Canadian Correspondent for Jane's Defence Weekly, and a researcher for Dalhousie's Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, until her retirement in 2012.

Duncan 'Dusty' Miller retired in 2003 as a Vice Admiral whose last posting was as Acting Deputy Commander Supreme Allied Command for NATO in Norfolk, Virginia.