

The airfield at Akrotiri in Cyprus became an important staging base for transport flights, tanker support and transit sorties, and as a holding base for additional air assets. Phantom FGR2 aircraft from Royal Air Force Germany provided air defence against a possible Iraqi attack by medium bombers. This force was supplemented by the Rapier Blindfire surface to air missiles of 20 Squadron Royal Air Force Regiment. Three Royal Navy Attacker class patrol vessels were also deployed, becoming operational at the end of October, to counter the terrorist threat from seaward, while a RAF Regiment Light Armoured Squadron maintained protection on land. From the Army extra port operators were deployed to assist with the handling of ships destined for and returning from the Gulf which were routed via Cyprus. The heightened state of alert on the island meant considerable extra guarding commitments for the garrison troops and the deployment of extra soldiers from UK to assist with garrison security. In addition, Territorial Army composite transport squadron was deployed to replace the UN Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) transport squadron as almost all Royal Corps of Transport (RCT) assets were deployed to the Gulf.

In Saddam Hussein we were facing an unpredictable opponent and we had to be prepared for a pre-emptive Iraqi attack including the use of Scud Short Range Ballistic Missiles and perhaps armed with chemical or biological warheads. Moreover, there was no sign that he intended to withdraw his troops from Kuwait. Indeed, his aggressive acts continued with the seizure of Western civilians as hostages and their movement to key military and strategic sites as human shields, with intense pressure put on western diplomatic staffs in Kuwait city, and with the occupying Iraqi soldiers looting shops and intimidating the civilian population. Consequently, economic and diplomatic pressure was increased with the United Nations playing the lead role. While we all hoped for a peaceful resolution, it became increasingly likely that allied offensive action would be required to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Nevertheless, if we could rigorously enforce the UN sanctions, there was just a chance that war could be avoided: Royal Navy forces played a significant role in the embargo operations.

EMBARGO OPERATIONS

The imposition of a ban on the movement of commodities into or out of Iraq/Kuwait by United Nations Security Council Resolution 665 shifted the objectives of the ARMILLA patrol ships from the protection of British entitled merchant shipping to the enforcement of the UN sanctions. The success of this endeavour depended upon the close co-operation of naval forces in the Multi-national Maritime Force, provided primarily by thirteen non Middle Eastern nations, namely Australia, Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, together with those of certain Gulf States. In addition, the United States and United Kingdom provided surface surveillance from maritime patrol aircraft. On 21 August Ministers of the Western European Union (WEU) countries agreed to co-ordinate enforcement activities; guidelines and a network of WEU naval points of contact were established. Representatives of the participating states attended a conference in Bahrain on 8 September to establish the basis of international co-operation, and the various naval commanders met the following week to develop the military *modus operandi* and to institute a series of patrol boxes throughout the Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Thereafter, a different country chaired respective monthly meetings to decide a schedule of nations to police the boxes.

A vital aspect of the embargo operations was the need to exchange information on the location, destination and cargo of all vessels within the region stretching from the Suez Canal to the Gulf. Well-founded arrangements for the monitoring of merchant shipping were extended to provide allied nations with a comprehensive appreciation of shipping movements, and a special cell was set up in London specifically to fuse data on Iraqi flagged vessels or other contacts of interest. Boardings themselves tended to be joint undertakings by warships of more than one nation, with one unit in contact designated the Scene of Action Commander (SAC). The Royal Navy made a considerable contribution to the enforcement effort, challenging a total of 3,171 merchant ships and participating in 36 boardings in the period up to the official ceasefire. In addition, RAF Nimrod aircraft flew 295 surveillance sorties from their base at Seeb in support of embargo operations. The professionalism and skill that our forces displayed in the conduct of boarding impressed other navies considerably; notably our use of high-powered Rigid Inflatable Boats (RIB) to enable boardings to take place while target vessels remained under significant headway, and the insertion of Royal Marine boarding parties and naval personnel using a method of abseiling from Lynx helicopters known as rapid roping.

This most effective allied action ensured, from the outset, that no merchant ship reached Iraq through the Gulf without being stopped

and inspected, and it also demonstrated the unequivocal resolve of the world community. Iraq made little effort to break the embargo in this area and, despite a relatively high level of patrol activity, the Royal Navy was directly involved in only two such potential incidents. I will describe these, the successful interception and boarding of the Iraqi cargo vessel AL WASITTI and the diversion of the tanker MV TADMUR, to illustrate the complexities inherent in such operations.

On 7 October 1990, both vessels were located in the Gulf of Aden by HM Ships BATTLEAXE and BRAZEN who proceeded to shadow them, in company with ships from the United States Navy and Royal Australian Navy. The AL WASITTI was assessed to be empty but TADMUR was suspected of carrying a small cargo under a false bottom in her holds. Their interception was authorised and the United States Navy (USN) Task Group Commander promulgated a tri-national boarding plan; the two Royal Navy ships were designated as the SAC for their respective incidents.

The AL WASITTI boarding began with a conventional challenge on VHF radio channels by HMS BATTLEAXE but the freighter, rather than reply to repeated requests to stop, increased speed and ignored all communication attempts. This prompted the SAC, in close consultation with the Ministry of Defence, to implement the next level of the Rules of Engagement, which permitted the firing of shells across the bows of the vessel. Despite this measured escalation in the use of force, the AL WASITTI refused to co-operate and Royal Marine boarding teams from HM Ships BATTLEAXE and LONDON were inserted by helicopter before a United States search team boarded by RIB: the ship was then cleared to proceed. While this protracted episode was unfolding, HMS BRAZEN continued to shadow MV TADMUR before boarding her without undue difficulty. This incident, however, highlighted different aspects of international co-operation; after the vessel was discovered to be carrying excessive amounts of foodstuffs, it was decided to divert the TADMUR to a friendly port. The refusal of the vessel's master to divert voluntarily and the necessary diplomatic activity involved in establishing a suitable destination added to the complexities facing those responsible for embargo enforcement.

As the United Nations deadline of 15 January 1991 for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait approached, attention turned to preparations for hostilities and embargo enforcement was then conducted from the operating areas allocated for transition to war. Routine boardings by Royal Navy ships continued at frequent intervals although, increasingly, the possibility that merchant ships might be used for covert military purposes had to be considered. On one occasion, our (MCMVs) were called in to check the Shar Allum Shoal in the central Gulf, which the United States Navy had declared a mine danger area after the Iraqi MV ZANOUBIA had been spotted lowering objects into the water. The interception of various merchant vessels, such as the Iraqi MV AIN ZALAH, re-emphasised the problematic nature of the boarding task itself. In the weeks before the United Nations deadline, and then once hostilities had started, the nations of the WEU assumed the lead in co-ordinating embargo operations in the Gulf, concentrating their patrols in the vicinity of the Straits of Hormuz, and I was pleased that HM Ships BRILLIANT and EXETER were able to participate in this operation for a short period as they entered the Gulf in early February 1991.

MILITARY BUILD-UP

Following our initial reaction to the Iraqi invasion, Her Majesty's Government assessed that we would have to consolidate our military stance to reinforce our political commitment for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, even as we waited to see what effect the economic embargo would have. While there were signs that sanctions were causing hardship within Iraq, there was no indication that it would force President Saddam Hussein to recall his troops. The military build-up therefore had to proceed in parallel.

In the latter part of August, the Secretary of State for Defence announced that our military contribution was to be increased. I deployed a composite squadron of Tornado GR1 aircraft from Royal Air Force Germany to Muharraq air base in Bahrain on the Gulf coast: the aircraft's capability to carry out offensive counter air operations and interdiction providing an additional deterrent to any further Iraqi aggression. The Secretary of State also announced that the naval force level in the Gulf was to be increased to four warships and authorised the deployment of the Type 42 air defence destroyer HMS GLOUCESTER. Furthermore, the three Royal Navy MCMVs already deployed to the Mediterranean were ordered to proceed through the Suez Canal to the Gulf on 6-7 September where the oceanographic survey vessel HMS HERALD sailed to join them to act as the MCM Command Ship. In September, HM Ships LONDON, BRAZEN and CARDIFF formed Group X-ray and sailed as planned to relieve the three escorts of Armilla Group