

Rules of Engagement

The Libyan Naval Blockade

During its Libyan mission, HMCS *Charlottetown* received and returned hostile fire – making it the first Canadian warship to do so since the Korean War. At a roundtable discussion organized by the Atlantic Council of Canada and the Canadian International Council in December 2011, *Charlottetown's* Commander, Craig Skjerpen (*pronounced Sharpen*), described this situation as “just doing our job.” His matter of fact, honest style of presentation had all present on the edge of their seats as he outlined this rendezvous with history.



Boarding party returns to HMCS *Charlottetown* after investigating a “Vessel of Interest.”

RCN Preparedness

The Royal Canadian Navy maintains a ship on each coast which is ready to sail within 8 hours in response to search and rescue or disaster response, or calls from the RCMP for assistance with drug interdiction, or Border Services (CBSA) for illegal immigration, and other government departments.

The Navy also maintains a *High Readiness* Naval Task Group (TG) for a ready response. This TG includes east and west coast ships that are able to deploy within 10 days. A TG is a combination of frigates, destroyers, replenishment ships, coastal defence vessels, and possibly submarines, depending on the mission requirements.

Navy ships are either preparing for high levels of readiness, conducting maintenance, or training around North America. Ships at *Standard Readiness*, for instance, may conduct counter-drug operations in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific.

Charlottetown was one of the High Readiness ships when the “Arab Spring” unfolded in the Middle East in early 2011. Canada’s political and military planners immediately began assessing the likelihood of a military response, including a naval initiative, being required.

Events leading to *Charlottetown's* deployment unfolded very quickly. On Saturday, February 26th 2011 Commander Skjerpen received a phone call from Fleet staff asking, how soon HMCS *Charlottetown* could set sail for an operation overseas. That inquiry initiated a series of communications followed by meetings with Formation Commander Rear Admiral Gardam, confirming that *Charlottetown* could be ready within a few days. This information was sent up the military chain to the political level. While the frigate was at sea conducting equipment checks on Monday, possible deployment was being discussed in Ottawa. *Charlottetown* was informed of

the decision on Tuesday and sailed for Libya on Wednesday.

Commander Skjerpen described how the decision to embark on the mission impacted *Charlottetown's* crew of nearly 250 people. They had less than 48 hours to inform their families that they may not be home for six months. Initially *Charlottetown* was dispatched to be part of the evacuation of Canadians from Libya. Aware of the deteriorating situation in Libya, the crew of HMCS *Charlottetown* continued to hone war-fighting skills during transit.

Upon arrival in the Mediterranean, the Canadian frigate was tasked to monitor vessels in the area and become acquainted with the flow of traffic, however, the type of military role was still being defined. When UNSCR 1973 was passed, the UN was still deciding if a military intervention would be required in addition to an embargo.

The enforcement of a no-fly zone commenced with the American-led coalition operation called *Odyssey Dawn*, and was transferred to a NATO operation called *Unified Protector*, commanded by Canada’s Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard.

HMCS Charlottetown’s encounter with history

The city of Misrata was under siege on land. The port – which had been a lifeline for food and medical supplies to more than 500,000 citizens – was mined and needed to be cleared using a NATO Minesweeper. Over 10 thousand migrant workers were trapped in Misrata and could not be evacuated. Fierce fighting continued night and day. As part of the mission to protect civilians, *Charlottetown* and other NATO ships, was tasked to defend the port.

The Coalition knew the enemy had no access to sensing technology and were dependent on the sounds of frigates’ motors to identify their location. While on night patrol one night, *Charlottetown* received information that small craft were moving near by. Following the suicide attack on the naval destroyer USS *Cole* (October 2000) which killed or injured 56 American sailors, such warnings are taken very seriously, and Commander Skjerpen ordered navigation lights turned off. With the moon over the horizon, *Charlottetown* was manoeuvring in complete darkness but in electronic unison with other coalition vessels.

Two fast moving rigid-hull inflatable boats (RHIBs), similar to those used against USS *Cole*, were noticed speeding toward the port. A coalition frigate gave a verbal warning, then fired flares and warning shots to ward off the suspicious vessels. They abruptly turned around – one headed to the nearest shore while the other returned to where it was launched. *Charlottetown* set chase, leading to an exchange of fire. The accuracy of the hostile firing was largely dependent on sound since visibility was compromised.

Responding to inquiries about onboard armament used in the engagement Commander Skjerpén said: “The team quickly responded with a 50 calibre machine gun as they were trained. *Charlottetown*’s main gun is a 57 millimetre anti-aircraft weapon, which is not really designed for shore bombardment.”

Rules of Engagement (ROE)

Most of the discussion following Skjerpén’s presentation was about ROE and how one is expected to fight a battle under what seems like limiting restrictions.

Commander Skjerpén explained he was operating under Canadian and NATO ROE and must ensure he doesn’t exceed either, with an added complication on this occasion relative to *UN Resolutions 1970 and 1973*. He said that “to prepare for operating under such circumstances, Canadian Forces personnel undergo planning exercises as a team that address all possible scenarios that can be conceived. Personnel are expected to perform appropriately, in accordance with such rules.”

Illustrating how ROE training is put into practice, Commander Skjerpén cited an example of boarding parties. In the Canadian context, such teams are comprised of members of the crew and may



PHOTO: MCPL LEONA CHAISSON, NOVA SCOTIA

*Mr. Fathi Ghanai from the Maritime Libyan Association, presents a plaque of appreciation to LCdr Matthew Coates (right), Executive Officer (XO) HMCS *Charlottetown* for the ship’s crew, in appreciation of their contributions during their deployment on Operation *MOBILE*.*

include a cook, technicians or equipment operators. They are trained in small arms weapons, hand to hand combat, boarding techniques and each receive extensive ROE training. This ensures that when a boarding party approaches another vessel, the Commander can have complete trust in their understanding of the ROE and knows they can protect themselves and their teammates while accomplishing their mission.

He further explained that Rules of Engagement are the framework within which the mission is conducted. Once the authority is given to carry out the mission, senior officials in Canada provide oversight but normally do not interfere with the Commander on site. The team operates within the ROE and national and international law. If there is any doubt about actions being considered within established ROE, the Commanding Officer has the

option of considering advice from the lawyer who serves alongside him, or seek further clarification from Canada or NATO as required.

Two lawyers were onboard during the deployment, each providing counsel under stressful conditions on an alternating basis. Skjerpén confirmed that these lawyers provide advice, however, the Commander is accountable for all actions taken.

In conclusion, Commander Skjerpén noted that, “all Halifax frigates are identical – all have the same weaponry, equipment. What makes each frigate different, in terms of weapon system,” he said, is “the team.” Our ability to exploit the tactical environment, and use the weapons systems to the best of their capability, is based on the professionalism and morale of the team. *Charlottetown*’s team includes the sailors’ families. “We would not be successful if it weren’t for the support of the families.”

Returning home to Halifax after six months away, the dockside reception was all about reuniting families; this included a father seeing his two-month old baby for the first time. There was a great deal of relief on the faces of both crew members and their families. The whole Halifax community were dockside to greet *Charlottetown*, including local Canadian Libyans thanking the crew for their part in liberating their native homeland. **FL**

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