



Operation Altair: Integrating Canadian Frigates into Iraq-War Strike Groups, 2004-2008

HMCS Toronto¹ (with 225 sailors),
USS George Washington,²
USS Vella Gulf,³ USNS Supply⁴ and
USS Bulkeley⁵ “participate in strike
group photo while operating in the
Arabian [Persian] Gulf. The...nuclear
aircraft carrier is on a scheduled
deployment in support of
Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

U.S. Navy

Official U.S. Navy photo
by Brien Aho,
June 3, 2004.

By Richard Sanders, coordinator, Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade

Since the conclusion of Operation Apollo in October 2003, Operation Altair has continued Canada’s “double-hatted” naval contributions to the U.S. “War on Terror,” which includes the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As the Canadian Forces says, Op Altair “picks up where Operation Apollo left off.”¹

Op Altair has consisted largely of six-month deployments to the Persian Gulf, by Canadian warships that “seamlessly integrate into U.S. task groups.”² These “task groups” are usually “Carrier Strike Groups” (CSGs) led by nuclear-powered aircraft carriers with a mission to “project a large amount of air power.”³ For this purpose, CSGs are deployed with a “Carrier Air Wing” of up to 90 warplanes⁴ and the “primary role of the carrier and its air wing is to provide...offensive firepower.”⁵ Aircraft carriers are vulnerable to attack, so CSGs include warships like frigates to protect them. They also include guided missile cruisers, destroyers, attack submarines and ships carrying munitions, fuel and supplies.⁶

Canada is the only nation able to integrate its warships into American CSGs. This is a source of great pride to Canada’s navy which is always seeking—through acquisitions and training exercises—to assimilate itself even more completely into the U.S. war machine. Altair has been a great boon in this process. Or, as the Canadian military puts it, Op Altair has “significantly enhanced the interoperability of the Canadian and U.S. navies”⁷ and “helped keep Canada’s navy relevant, responsive, and effective.”⁸

During three, six-month deployments between 2004 and 2008, 675 Canadian sailors on three Canadian warships were integrated into U.S. “Strike Groups” that waged war in Iraq.

Operation Altair has had five distinct phases, rotations or “rotos.” The first four involved Canadian patrol frigates on “single ship deployments (with embarked helicopter detachments) integrated with suitable U.S. carrier strike groups.”⁹ The fifth rotation deployed three Canadian warships; a destroyer, frigate and supply ship. This article will examine three of these “Rotos” and expose how 675 Canadian sailors aboard three Canadian frigates were complicit in the Iraq war.

Roto 0

January to July 2004 “HMCS Toronto...operated with the USS George Washington Carrier Strike Group [CSG].”¹⁰

This U.S. CSG—led by the USS Washington aircraft carrier during “a ‘surge’ deployment”¹¹ to the Persian Gulf—included six other U.S. warships, the HMCS Toronto¹² (with 225 sailors), and Carrier Air Wing 7 (CVW-7)—with dozens of fighter, attack and electronic warfare aircraft.¹³

A U.S. Navy magazine reported that this Strike Group’s sailors and air crew knew “their ultimate destination was to provide air support for ground

troops fighting Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.”¹⁴

During the first half of 2004, Strike Fighter Squadron 131 (VFA-131), aka the ‘Wildcat’ Squadron,¹⁵ was “deployed aboard USS George Washington in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.”¹⁶ In April, the Wildcats’ F/A-18 Hornet fighter/attack warplanes joined the “First Battle of Fallujah,” codenamed Operation Vigilant Resolve. On April 8, one of their F/A-18s “conducted a 20 mm strafing run against an enemy position.” On the next day, “[a]nother VFA-131 Hornet dropped two 500 pound GBU-12 laser-guided bombs on another enemy position in Fallujah, Iraq.”¹⁷ This was “the first live ordnance dropped by CVW-7 aircraft since George Washington deployed in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom,”¹⁸ but it was not the last.

Of the 7,592 aircraft sorties emanating from this Strike Group—in which the HMCS Toronto was integrated—“more than 1,500 were flown in direct support of OIF [Operation Iraqi Freedom], expending approximately 82 tons of ordnance.”¹⁹

On April 9, after the first 1,000 pounds of ordnance was dropped on Fallujah by Wildcat warplanes, the George Washington (GW) commander, Rear Adm. Denby Starling, “praised the work of GW and CVW-7 as they engaged in Operation Vigilant Resolve,” saying the Strike Group wielded a “tremendous amount of the air power” and “whether we’re flying reconnaissance missions, engaging in electronic warfare or dropping ordnance, we have succeeded at every turn.”²⁰

This U.S. Navy report stated “In addition to the great air support

In 2007, the HMCS Ottawa and its 225 sailors provided "Force Protection" for the USS Boxer Strike Group, while it delivered 2,000 Marines to battle in Iraq.

USS Boxer

Official Canadian Navy photo
by MCpl Robert Bottrill

HMCS Ottawa

provided by GW and CVW-7, the strike group ships USS Vella Gulf, Bulkeley and HMCS Toronto initiated or were involved in more than 200 boardings of merchant vessels during maritime interdiction operations and logged over 12,000 surface contacts in the Persian Gulf.²¹

Although the extent to which these "maritime interdiction operations" aided and abetted the Iraq war is unknown, this CSG's primary focus was definitely fighting the Iraq war. In a series of official U.S. Navy photos showing the HMCS Toronto sailing with the USS Washington "during a strike group photo formation while operating in the Arabian Gulf" in June 2004, every caption notes that the warships were on a "scheduled deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom."²² The war in Afghanistan is not even mentioned.

Roto 2

Sept. 2006 to March 2007 "HMCS Ottawa...operated with the USS Boxer Expeditionary Strike Group [ESG]."²³

This Strike Group of the USS Boxer aircraft carrier, included the:

- 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit
- Canadian frigate HMCS Ottawa,
- USS Dubuque, which was "a holding facility for Iraqi POWs" and helped protect "oil platforms in the northern part of the Persian Gulf."²⁴
- USS Comstock, a Dock Landing Ship to "transport and launch amphibious craft and vehicles," to land U.S. Marines, on "hostile shores"²⁵
- USS Bunker Hill, a heavily-armed guided missile cruiser
- USS Benfold and USS Howard, two guided missile destroyers.²⁶

The Strike Group's first job was a self-described "mission...to transport the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) to Iraq in support of Operation

Iraqi Freedom."²⁷

This ESG, into which the Ottawa and its crew of 225 sailors were integrated, is a "flexible naval force" working "in support of Marine or joint forces operating in near-shore regions or deep inland."²⁸ Among its "nearly 6,000 Sailors and Marines,"²⁹ was the 15th MEU,³⁰ "with a strength of about 2,200 personnel."³¹ When the ESG arrived in Iraq in mid-November, these Marines went ashore and "began operating in Al Anbar province as Task Force Bullrush."³² The goal of Bullrush was to "defeat insurgent forces" in a "25,000 square km. area" of Iraq "west of the Euphrates River to the Jordanian and Syrian borders."³³ During their four months in Iraq, "the MEU conducted combat operations in Rutbah, Barwana, Haditha, Haqlaniyah, Ramadi and Al Asad,"³⁴ and "detained over 300 suspected insurgents."³⁵

Once the HMCS Ottawa had helped escort these forces to Iraq, and "the Marines went ashore," the Boxer ESG "spent five months in the Persian Gulf conducting maritime security operations with coalition partners."³⁶ Whether these maritime operations had anything to do with Afghanistan is dubious. However, the role of these operations in the Iraq war is openly accepted. For example, when this Strike Group's so called "maritime security operations" began, a U.S. 5th Fleet Public Affairs' article explained the reasons for these maritime operations. Although it refers to Iraq six times, it does not even once mention Afghanistan.³⁷

In January 2007, during the Boxer Strike Group's deployment, President G.W.Bush announced a "surge" that escalated the war with 20,000 more U.S. troops. Many were deployed to Al Anbar province where the Boxer ESG had already dropped off Marines for Task Force Bullrush. In

February, the 15th MEU's deployment was extended to support this "surge."³⁸

What was the Ottawa's role within the Boxer Strike Group's Iraq war mission? Generally, as stated by U.S. Central Command in its description of Canada's role in the "War on Terror," "[h]eavily armed, manoeuvrable warships," like Canada's frigates, are used to "provide defensive capabilities to the more vulnerable specialized vessels in the multinational coalition fleet."³⁹ This is called "Force Protection." For the Boxer Strike Group in particular, we know of a specific type of protection that Canada was tasked to perform. In an article about the Ottawa's 2006-2007 deployment with the USS Boxer, the Canadian frigate's commander, Captain Darren Hawco, noted:

"The CAN/U.S. level of interoperability is at such a seamless level that Canadian warships are assigned major warfare duties within deploying strike groups. In Ottawa's case, *the ship was assigned the duty of Anti-Submarine Warfare Commander.*"⁴⁰ (Emphasis added)

While neither Afghanistan nor Iraq have any subs, Iran does. During the Boxer ESG's mission there was much hype about a possible threat to U.S. forces from Iran. As reported in September 2006 by Debka, an Israeli-intelligence linked media source, the Boxer ESG's warships were

"equipped and their crews trained for rapid rescue and aid missions to damaged ships and wounded crewmen. Their presence...indicates that the Boxer strike group is prepared for Iranian attack by sea, air, *submarine*, sea-to-sea missiles or depth mines."⁴¹ (Emphasis added)

We also know that the Boxer Strike Group's Anti-Submarine Warfare Commander, Captain Hawco of the Ottawa, was concerned about Iran as

he conducted “force protection” duties for the U.S. Navy at the entrance to the Persian Gulf. He writes that the

“[HMCS] Ottawa was assigned...to conduct an extended force protection escort of the USS Newport News [a nuclear-powered submarine] through the Straits of Hormuz over a 24-hour period and a transit distance of 240 nautical miles. Again, the flexibility of naval power was demonstrated, as my warship was suddenly re-roled...in favour of a completely different, high priority mission.... [T]he escort [was] conducted under close Iranian surveillance....”⁴² (Emphasis added)

There was also great concern at the time that the U.S.-led naval buildup in the Persian Gulf, including the Boxer Strike Group, although directly aimed at Iraq, was also threatening war with Iran. Many feared that a strike against Iran was imminent and that U.S. forces might provoke or fabricate an incident to trigger such a war (as had been done with the Gulf-of-Tonkin incident that escalated the Vietnam war).⁴³

Roto 3

Nov. 2007 to April 2008

“HMCS Charlottetown ...operated with the USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group [CSG].”⁴⁴

Besides the Charlottetown, this Strike Group included dozens of warplanes from Carrier Air Wing Three (CVW 3), two guided missile cruisers, three guided missile destroyers, a nuclear-powered attack submarine, a UK destroyer⁴⁵ and “more than 7,300 Sailors.”⁴⁶

In describing this six-month deployment of the Charlottetown, with its 225 sailors, Senator Catherine Callbeck, focused on carefully selected mission highlights, saying the frigate

“tracked five boats...engaged in human smuggling, stopped one act of piracy,...conducted surveillance on another boat after it was taken by pirates....[and] intercepted more than six tonnes of narcotics and 2,000 smuggled cases of alcohol.”⁴⁷

She did not however mention that the Strike Group into which the Charlottetown was integrated, launched dozens of warplanes on thousands of sorties expending tens of thousands of pounds of bombs and missiles on Iraq.



The Charlottetown with 225 sailors was integrated into the USS Truman Carrier Strike Group when it launched massive bombing raids against Iraq in 2008.

Photo: Cpl Robert LeBlanc, November 12, 2007

U.S. military sources reveal that the Truman CSG’s mission was not only to conduct “maritime security operations” but also to provide “air support” within the CENTCOM ‘Area of Responsibility.’⁴⁸ An official, U.S. Navy history of the USS Truman describes its “combat deployment in November 2007” and provides details of its “air support” for the Iraq war. Integrated with the Charlottetown, within the USS Truman CSG, were dozens of warplanes with CVW 3, aka the “Battle Axe.” These fighter, attack and electronic warfare aircraft with the Truman’s “Carrier Air Wing”

“flew more than 26,500 hours during 9,500 sorties. Of these, 2,459 were combat sorties directly supporting Coalition forces serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The air wing flew just under 14,000 combat hours and expended 77,500 pounds of ordnance.”⁴⁹

This U.S. Navy record does not even mention Afghanistan in passing. All the “combat sorties” and “ordnance” emanating from this Strike Group, were aimed at targets in Iraq.

Since the Charlottetown was thoroughly and completely integrated into the Truman CSG it could not possibly have remained an innocent bystander during the massive waves of destructive “air power” hitting Iraq. To understand of the Charlottetown’s role in the Truman CSG’s Iraq-war operations, we must look at the rigorous training that Canadian sailors engaged in prior to setting out for the Persian Gulf with the Truman in 2007.

Earlier that year, the Charlottetown and her sailors joined an elaborate week-long exercise off the coast of Virginia, called “Trident Warrior 2007.” A Canadian navy article about these trials with the Truman CSG, said

the “Charlottetown was fully integrated into this carrier strike group.”⁵⁰

During this exercise, when the Strike Group “conducted manoeuvres and performed flight operations together,” the Charlottetown played a vital role in supporting warplanes launching from the USS Truman. The Canadian frigate was being groomed for a particular task during its upcoming Iraq war deployment with the Truman. As the Canadian navy noted regarding “Trident Warrior 2007,” “As the ship [Charlottetown] may deploy with the [Truman] strike group later this year, these trials were of vital importance to our interoperability.”⁵¹

One particularly “challenging operation during the exercise” was when the Charlottetown performed “the duty of Plane Guard for American carrier Harry S. Truman.”⁵² The job of “Plane Guard” is often performed by frigates, like the Charlottetown, which are suited to protecting U.S. aircraft carriers. The Plane Guard’s task is to “recover the aircrew of planes or helicopters which ditch or crash in the water during aircraft carrier flight operations.”⁵³ Here is how this training was described by the Canadian Forces:

“Plane Guard...is a standby station, 1.5 miles astern of the aircraft carrier, where we followed as it launched and recovered F-18 Super Hornets, Harriers, Airborne Early Warning aircraft, and helicopters.

It was a spectacular air show free of charge, but was an extremely busy 12 hours for the captain and the bridge watchkeepers. The ship [Charlottetown] was required to constantly manoeuvre at high speed in order to follow the Harry S. Truman as she hunted the wind for good courses to launch and recover aircraft. This was more challenging at

night.... One bridge watchkeeper under training, who had the opportunity to drive at night, was actually in a sweat.... 'I really feel like I'm in the Navy now, sir,' he said to the captain, who laughed in agreement."⁵⁴

In June 2007, as its Persian Gulf tour approached, the Charlotte-town joined another U.S. exercise with the Truman, called Fleet Synthetic Training Joint. This "joint exercise for the U.S. Navy, Army and Air Force, ranging from submarines to fighter jets and Army units," was a "training opportunity for Charlottetown." This Canadian frigate had "been working with the U.S. Navy's Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group for the past few months" as "part of their work-up cycle," said LCdr Puddington of the Canadian Forces Maritime Warfare Centre.⁵⁵

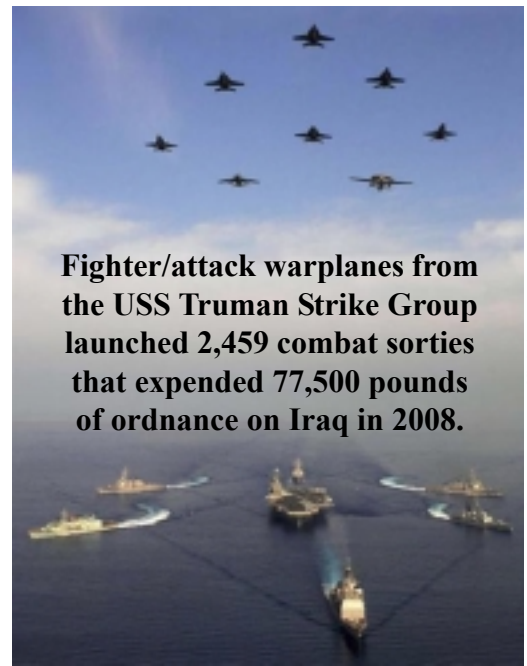
Charlottetown's 2007 deployment to the Persian Gulf with the Truman CSG, was not its first. In January 2001, the Charlottetown was the very first Canadian frigate to integrate with a U.S. Aircraft Carrier Battle Group when it deployed to the Persian Gulf for six months.⁵⁶ While there, it helped 12 U.S. warships enforce the economic sanctions crippling Iraq.⁵⁷

Operation Altair's "Roto 3" was in fact "the 25th time a Canadian vessel ...[was] deploying to the Persian Gulf region," noted Cmdr. Patrick St-Denis. "We have been deploying with the strike group or other coalition forces in the Gulf quite regularly."⁵⁸

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