

Interoperability and Innovation

by **CDRE Richard Menhinick**

Abstract:

While interoperability and innovation in a maritime coalition environment is often looked at as a technical issue, it is interpersonal relationships and trust that truly underpin both. Given the differing strategic goals, legal requirements, rules of engagement, personalities and cultures of the nations involved, failure to engage across the highest strategic levels will inevitably lead to failure of interoperability at sea. Trust, relationships, mutual respect, an understanding of culture, patience and courtesy are all required to make interoperability work. The security agendas of small states will thus be well served by the dividends of personal interaction and human understanding that comes from working and serving effectively and sensitively in Operations Other Than War.

Keywords: Coalition Warfare; Interoperability; Maritime Security; Operations Other Than War

INTRODUCTION

This short essay will focus in on interoperability and innovation in a maritime coalition environment. The essay will first describe a little of the Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 operation I commanded and then briefly mention education and training. It will also attempt to answer the follow three questions:

- Does a greater role in Operations Other Than War (OOTW) serve the national security agendas of small states?
- What are the conditions and considerations unique to small states in OOTW?

- In an era of limited defense resources, what and how can the militaries of small states contribute and achieve beyond mere statements of ambitions?

BACKGROUND

The Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) is a United States (US) led coalition of 25 nations (plus three nations with observer status) committed to: countering violent extremism and terrorist networks in maritime areas; working with regional and other partners to improve overall security, stability and regional nations' maritime capabilities; and when requested responding to environmental and humanitarian crises.¹



US Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Bart Bauer, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:CTF-150.jpg>

Ships assigned to CTF-150 assemble in formation

The staffs are truly multinational, with naval representatives from 21 of the 25 nations in the planning and operations cells of the CMF. The multinational aspects of the operation and its close regional links can be seen in the fact that I took over command from RADM Zakuallah of the Pakistan Navy and handed back command to RADM Abassi of Pakistan. For the duration of my command I had with me 26 Royal Australian Navy (RAN) personnel and as such we formed a headquarters team collocated with the US 5th Fleet Command in Bahrain, deploying command elements to sea as necessary for focal and surge operations. The decision was made to collocate with the US Command at Bahrain so as to be as integrated and influential as possible, given the vital strategic and then operational lines of command that underpin such a complex operation with so many competing, complimentary and unique international, national and legal

requirements. My Australian force normally included the Australian major surface combatant, which is permanently deployed to the region, and also on occasion one of the Australian AP3-C maritime patrol aircraft. Australia also maintains a permanent naval presence on the staff of the CMF itself.

Although I was working for the Commander Combined Maritime Force, he was also a US national commander: Commander US 5th Fleet. Similarly, I was a deployed Commander of an Australian Task Group and I remained at all times under the national command of the Australian Commander of Joint Task Force 633 which was GEN Mark Kelly and then GEN John Cantwell.

CTF 150 was established in February 2002 with a focus on counterterrorism. The US, Germany, Spain, Italy, France, United Kingdom (UK), Netherlands, Pakistan, Canada, Denmark and



A Royal Australian Air Force AP-3C Orion Maritime Patrol Aircraft

Australia have all commanded CTF 150. It is truly an OOTW approach. CTF 150 also has a strong role in the Struggle Against Violent Extremism, or "SAVE," operation. This includes a significant strategic role in high level and continual regional engagement.

Australia has a great deal of experience at sea in the Middle East region. Australia and the RAN have been in the Middle East with either ships and/or command elements continually since 1990, but this was the first time Australia had commanded combined operations outside the Persian Gulf itself, which brought with it a new set of complexities for irregular warfare and an increased level of ambiguity. Interoperability was a key consideration and we were working with a large number of small states.

During the four month command tenure from December 2009 to the end of April 2010, we intercepted and queried over 500 vessels and boarded an additional 140. We were also responsible for coordinating the complex logistics resupply, a significant consideration in maritime operations given that the area of operations was over 3 million square miles, and we planned and led direct counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The Middle East Area of Operations has a strategic, operational and legal environment which presents a number of unique challenges. These include: the nature of the region; the years of conflict and ongoing tensions with regional neighbors; the lack of clear boundaries with respect to territorial waters; differing obligations under international law; and the lack of a United Nations (UN) mandate for the maritime environment. This made command very complex.

The environment was further complicated by each of the coalition nations operating under their own discrete Rules of Engagement (ROE). The command encompassed 3.3 million square nautical miles of seas and oceans and covered an extremely complex area including the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, northern Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz. This included:

- Sea Lines of Communications and choke points vital to the world economy (Strait of Hormuz and Bab-al-Mandeb);
- Areas which are a breeding ground for violent extremism;
- Failed and failing states which constitute a security challenge;
- Illegal destabilizing or terrorist-related activities such as drug smuggling, human trafficking and piracy; and
- A delicate political situation in the region.

This was a complex area with massive amounts of shipping, fragile maritime infrastructure and seasonal weather patterns which greatly affected the maritime environment. In short, the area commanded by CTF 150 was in essence the maritime flank of operations in several countries, particularly Afghanistan. This period also overlapped with Saudi operations on the border with Yemen and the Houthi insurgency in Yemen. We needed to remember that Al-Qaeda threats in the vicinity of the Bab-al-Mandeb were real and ongoing: some 25,000 ships, or about seven percent of the world's shipping, pass through there each year whilst about 40% of the world's total shipments of oil also pass through the Strait of Hormuz.² The attack on the Japanese Tanker *M. Star* on 28 July 2010 by a small explosive-laden boat is a case in point.

The main focus of our operations was to: prevent or disrupt attacks; intercept or deter the smuggling of illicit cargo such as narcotics, contraband and fuel which fund the terrorist activities; intercept weapons and ammunition; and intercept or deter the movement of people smugglers and even terrorists by sea, especially into Yemen.

INNOVATION AND INTEROPERABILITY

Technical interoperability and innovation in the maritime environment occurs at several levels, including the binary 0s and 1s that underpin any data combat system and the complex tactical data communications that link them. Allies must act together via a common tactical data link to ensure effective communications are maintained at all times and to avoid the risk of fratricide—the consequences of which will destroy any strategic aim a country had, or planned to have, when becoming involved in the operation.

I have always considered myself a reasonably technically adept officer: an air warfare and combat systems specialist who has operated and commanded cutting edge combat systems in war and peace in two navies and most of the seas and oceans of the world. My background is in driving ships from the bridge and in fighting ships from operations rooms. I am also a qualified air intercept controller and have worked extensively in complex and multi tactical data link environments, including the crowded Persian Gulf during the First Gulf War. It would therefore be logical for me to focus on a technical approach.

However, I will not do so, as in my experience interoperability is all too often only considered at the operational level in terms of the technical ability of systems to work effectively together. Even at the operational level, OOTW is at least as much about interoperability at the personal level as it is about technical interoperability.

At the strategic command level, failure to understand the personal level of interoperability and innovation will have an even greater destabilizing affect on a coalition than failure of interoperability at the technical level. Personal animosity will destroy any strategic aim a country has, or planned to have, when becoming involved in the operation. Therefore, trust, relationships, mutual respect, an understanding of culture, patience and courtesy are all required to make interoperability work.

In OOTW, each nation brings with it its own strategic goals, legal requirements and rules of engagement, based on national and international law as well as ethics and its own personality and culture. Failure by a leader to ensure that both he and his command team really comprehend and assimilate this at all levels and in all times, from high tempo to more mundane moments, will result in strategic and operational failure, regardless of how technically interoperable that force might be.

The reality is that allies and coalitions do not have identical aims. They are often separated by language, religion, culture, laws and customs. But they do have similar strategic goals and being strategically adept and aware is essential.

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Field Marshal Sir William Slim delivered a seminal speech to the US Command and General Staff College in 1952 on “Higher Command in War” in which he stated that:

Now it is an extraordinary thing that you should meet with so much opposition from allies. Allies, altogether, are really very extraordinary people. It is astonishing how obstinate they are, how parochially minded, how ridiculously sensitive to prestige and how wrapped up in obsolete political ideas. It is equally astonishing how they fail to see how broad-minded you are, how clear your picture is, how up-to-date you are and how cooperative and big-hearted you are. It is extraordinary. But let me tell you, when you feel like that about allies, just remind yourself of two things. First, that you are an ally too, and all allies look just the same. If you walk to the other side of the table, you will look just like that to the fellow sitting opposite. Then the next thing to remember is that there is only one thing worse than having allies—that is not having allies.³

These words underpinned our approach to the operations against maritime terrorism and terrorist related criminal activity in the Middle East. They encapsulate the very basics of interoperability and innovation.

In OOTW, the legal framework is often ambiguous and UN mandates lacking. In these operations the first step to any interoperability is having a command culture and intent focusing on building trust and respect with regional countries and with allies or coalition partners, or as Slim said, “[walking] to the other side of the table.” In the case of interoperability and innovation in the Middle East, you need to demonstrate the understanding that you are just a visitor who will inevitably depart the region and emphasize early on your willingness to learn from those who live in the region and who know it much better than any outsider ever could.

In CTF 150 we commanded 38 ships from eight nations and also had over 250 hours of maritime patrol aircraft support. Supporting us were ships and aircraft from the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, Britain, Canada and Australia. Saudi Arabia has the biggest navy on the Arabian Peninsula and by working with them at the personal level we received continual assets from them via ships in associated support to us. This personal interoperability did not just stop at the strategic command level. We instigated a program which saw eight of their officers with us in the CTF 150 headquarters over a four week period. This I think had a marked effect in a very short time.

RADM Bernard Miranda of the Republic of Singapore Navy had command of the anti-piracy operation, CTF-151, for much of the time I was commanding the anti-terrorist operations. We were working in the same water space and as such we both ensured that our navies worked together at the personal level first and that we shared the headquarters building with his Bahrain-based liaison team and forged interoperability across the commands through friendship and cooperation. Even ensuring that his staff displayed the Singapore vaval ensign opposite our own was innovative—it certainly marked a statement of intent and respect. I also had a RAN officer embedded with him at all times in his command ship. Again the focus was on the personal linkages, first and foremost.

Australian naval experiences in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East have thus found that personnel interoperability is a critical factor when working strategically. To ensure that all parties felt welcome and knew that the Australian Navy was there to help, we also attempted simple gestures such as posting an Arabic “word-of-the-day,” which resulted in significant improvement in the achievement of operational outcomes and

a good deal of humor—Australians are renowned for being lousy at accents and languages.

To enact these innovations however, involved significant strategic level visits and establishing relationships with countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, the UAE, Pakistan and Oman, to ensure that strategic interaction was aligned prior to any action taken. Maritime operations across 3.3 million square miles of seas and oceans are more strategic than operational. 15 nations had waters bordering my area of operations. A key role of any commander in such a situation is to visit the nations and talk with their governments where appropriate and certainly their senior naval command and other maritime law enforcement agencies. This invariably was done to discuss both Combined Maritime Force and Australian national issues and best done in company with the Australian Ambassador and Australian Defense Attaché. Knowledge of

Australian strategic interests and a respect for the cultural and regional interests of the nations was vital. Strategic considerations drove the operations at all times. A failure to engage across the highest strategic levels will lead to failure of interoperability at sea every time.

To even attempt to command and operate in such an area requires competent legal advice on hand at all times. The level of legal advice in a command role in a Coalition environment

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requires an advanced level of knowledge of maritime and operational law plus a deep understanding of the strategic context. A commander needs to understand and respect the legal positions of each and every one of the nations

who are providing assets and those nations that live in the region itself. This requires one to focus continually at the strategic and operational level—conducting senior regional engagement visits is as important a factor



Royal Marines investigate two suspected pirate skiffs in the Gulf of Aden, June 2009

in conducting irregular warfare at sea as the tactical employment of assets.

Nations have differing views of maritime security operations and obligations. Some nations have declared they are in a state of armed conflict with terrorists, while others view terrorists as criminals, not combatants. These differences are reflected in ROE and other policy approaches. Different political climates between two nations can have serious implications—a completely legal action may be perceived as a provocation. A commander needs to be very aware of these issues at all times.

Interoperability and innovation is often looked at as a technical issue, however as with everything military, political and diplomatic, it is interpersonal relationships and trust that truly underpin both. A comprehensive approach to education and training, with common courses and international exchange visits, is critical to developing the cultural understanding and interpersonal relationships essential to strategic interoperability between countries big or small. The culture underpinning effective interoperability and innovation can best be generated through education and training and the seconding of personnel between organizations, which creates trust, friendship and openness between people, and the creation of joint units and partnerships between nations. To emphasize the importance of human interaction, then Vice Chief of Defense, and now Chief of Defense, GEN Hurley stated in his address to the 2011 Australian Command and Staff College course that any graduate without a solid and enduring friendship with at least one overseas member by the end of the course had effectively failed in his estimation, regardless of their final grade. The ability to “phone a friend” in a future crisis or emergency and offer to help or to dispel a concern cannot

be overstated. Without a doubt, the Australian Command and Staff College gains its greatest strategic strength from the inclusion of overseas course members. Australian course members not only learn from their overseas peers, but also learn from the different perspectives brought to the course by the participation of “outsiders” in certain modules and exercises, especially syndicate discussions.

It is people, people, and people that make the difference.

Thus to be interoperable and innovative and therefore effective in a coalition environment, you need first to train and educate interoperability—to in effect “Talk the Walk.”

CONCLUSION

Going back to the three key questions:

- Does a greater role in OOTW serve the national security agendas of small states?
- What are the conditions and considerations unique to small states in OOTW?
- In an era of limited defense resources, what and how can the militaries of small states contribute and achieve beyond mere statements of ambitions?

My answer is yes to the first one as the security agendas of small states are well served by the personal interaction and human understanding that comes from working and serving effectively and sensitively in such roles. To the second one, I think that small states have some unique advantages over large states as they are less threatening and thus can be trusted to leave when the operation is completed. As to the third, it is people, people, and people that make the difference.



As Slim said “there is only one thing worse than having allies—that is not having allies,” and small states make really good allies because their people are really good—that has certainly been my experience working internationally for many years, and especially so with regards to Singapore. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. “Regional Maritime Officers Complete Operational Planning Course,” *Combined Maritime Forces*, 12 April 2010, <http://www.cusnc.navy.mil/articles/2010/CMF025.html>.
2. Raissa Kasolowsky, “Yemen Faces Qaeda, Pirate Threats in Vital Strait,” *Reuters*, 6 July 2010.
3. Field Marshal Sir William Slim, “Higher Command in War,” US Command and General Staff College, 1952.



CDRE Richard Menhinick joined the Royal Australian Navy in January 1976. After graduating in 1980 he undertook practical sea-training, culminating in the award of his Bridge Watchkeeping Certificate in 1982. Postings such as Aide-de-Camp to the Governor of Tasmania, Assistant Warfare Officer on *HMAS Derwent* and Air Intercept Controller on *HMAS Perth* followed. In 1987, he undertook the Principal Warfare Officer's course. He then served on exchange at sea in the Royal Navy for two years on *HMS Cardiff*. This posting to the UK included a deployment to the Persian Gulf as part of the "Armillar Patrol" monitoring Iran and Iraq.

On return to Australia he served in *HMAS Brisbane* in the 1990-1991 Gulf War. He subsequently spent two years as Fleet Direction Officer at Maritime Headquarters in Sydney, prior to being appointed as Executive Officer of the destroyer *HMAS Hobart* from 1993-1995. On promotion to Commander he was posted firstly as head of the Operational Design Group at the Navy Combat Data System Centre, and then as Deputy Director Surface Warfare Development at Australian Defense Headquarters. He assumed Command of the new *Anzac* class frigate *HMAS Warramunga* on 24 January 2000.

Following promotion to Captain he became Director of the Sea Power Centre, Australia in February 2002. He then commanded the *Anzac* class frigate *HMAS Anzac* from December 2003 to December 2005. After this he served as Chief of Staff to the Vice Chief of the Defense Force and Chief of Joint Operations throughout 2006 before being promoted to Commodore and posted as Director General Military Strategy in Strategic Policy Division in December of that year. In November 2008 he became the inaugural DG Navy Transformation and Innovation, leading the New Generation Navy change program. He was then appointed Commander of the Combined Task Force 150 in the Middle East Area of Operations from December 2009 to April 2010 and Commandant of the Australian Command and Staff College in May 2010.

Amongst other awards, he is a Member of the Order of Australia and has been conferred the Conspicuous Service Cross and the Commendation for Distinguished Service. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in International Relations and Strategic Studies, and a master's degree in Maritime Studies. He has written in many professional publications and has one major work published via the University of Wollongong: *Sea Control and Maritime Power Projection for Australia*.