

WHAT MAKES NEWS NEWSWORTHY?

NATO Standing Force in the Gulf of Aden

INTERVIEW with Tony White

In order to provide counter piracy support in the Gulf of Aden, and to ensure the delivery of the Humanitarian Aid intended to the territory of Somalia, NATO escorted World Food Program vessels off the coast of Somalia, from October to December 2008. This mission was assigned to the NATO Standing Maritime Group 2 and was acting under the name of Operation Allied provider. Following the request of the Secretary General of the United Nations on 25 September 2008, the operation took place in support of UNSC resolution 1814, 1816, and 1838.



Besides, Operation Allied Provider was an exceptional opportunity to make the public and experts aware of international operations in the Gulf of Aden. NATO ships boarded TV crews and journalists with the intent of sending a clear message: the international community was acting as a whole to enhance the safety of commercial maritime routes and international navigations in the sea of Somalia.

To this date NATO ships are once again operating in the Horn of Africa and in the Gulf of Aden following the launch of operation Allied Protector, which started 24 March 2009.

We met NATO's press officer, Mr. Tony White, in Turin, during the International Maritime Meeting organised by UNICRI last 28 January, to further discuss the value of such a military mission and about the need to address the international audience with more information.

Q: How was the alliance operating? And what is the forecast for future regional relationships?

A: Escorting is a straightforward military capability, but before an alliance can commit itself, it has to be sure that the requests and the rules of engagement are clear; so when NATO received the request and it was debated among the council, almost all nations agreed that this was a pressing threat. On 9 October 2008 NATO responded positively to the UN's request, and the crucial importance of such a decision was that the mission was aimed at deterring piracy besides escorting the food aid.

There was a previously scheduled out of the area deployment of seven ships that were operating in the north

of the Persian Gulf. It was a timely request and did not take long for NATO to respond. Moreover, I think this mission was not only a humanitarian aid-escorting mission, but it was also a huge help in deterring piracy.

The previous mission, the Standing NATO Maritime Group, started its operation on October 15th, and on the 20th those seven ships had split into two groups: three of them went to escort the WFP ships, while the other four continued the scheduled port visit in the Persian Gulf.

The three ships later became four ships as the Turkish crew actually joined us; the mission ran until December 12th, which was exactly what the UN had asked for, because all they needed was to fill the gap between October and December, knowing that the EU mission was going to start up then. During that time we escorted several WFP ships and the humanitarian aid that successfully escorted and delivered exceeded 30.000 tonnes.

I believe that in the future, countries like Yemen and Oman will become very important too. And we are also getting encouraging signs that another regional neighbour like Egypt is getting involved as well: we have a good relationship with Egypt, because of our Mediterranean dialogue process.

Q: NATO's media office also encouraged the media to cover the operations, carrying on their ships TV crews and photographers. What was the purpose of this, and what the main achievements?

A: There is an old saying in media operations, "if you go somewhere or you do something and the media do not cover you, did you actually go?"

This is something that I have followed myself in my career as a public affairs officer and, having benefited from media operation in the past, I knew the importance of engaging the media in our mission in the Gulf of Aden.

The public needs to see that there is a visible and recognisable response by an institution such as NATO to a threat such as piracy; so if we had not added the media coverage on our mission, in the eye of the public did NATO really get involved?

If you do not register what the public can read about, and if the public does not see the mission's images and pictures, the institution does not get the recognition for something it did.

Another aspect that I judge very important is that publicising your response and your commitment to support the UN and the WFP in the fight against piracy, sends a message to the perpetrators of this threat and it also sends a message to the region that NATO cares about the East Africa area and cares about the countries of the Gulf of Aden.

Q: Are you saying that raising more public interest automatically raises more political attention?

A: Clearly, when NATO decided to get involved, we knew that there would be risks not only for the ships themselves, but also political risks. So it is important that we get a message across not only to the Somali people, but we also wanted to tell the ship industry around the world that we will do whatever we can to keep this channel safe, because all our nations depend on this international economy; we also wanted to send a message to the pirates saying that we will not stand to this and we will use our military resources to deter their threat.

Q: Did you notice any positive and measurable reactions from the public after the media operation coverage?

A: It is difficult to monitor the media coverage of our mission in Africa, but I could notice a quick change in the quantity of news related to the area and to piracy from the very beginning.

My first phone call as a media operation officer was to the WFP public affairs person who was based in Kenya, where the WFP was taking the food supplies (and then up to Mogadishu N.f.E) and I shared my views and

ideas with him.

After having spoken with him, the media coverage in Africa started improving, especially in Kenya and Somalia, but in order to better give a picture of NATO's operations, images are the best work tool.

A huge part of the operation was to get images from the actual ships, to the media, not only in that region, but also all over the world. And I can tell you that, obviously, we have done a lot of media operation planning; in particular, when the Sirius star was apprehended by the pirates, the international media coverage was unprecedented, and so was the fact that we were able to get our image team on board of the Italian military ship to revive the video footage. The appetite of the international media for this video was extremely high, and our images were used in almost all major media networks, because to tell a story, especially in TV, you need pictures.

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