

# **Royal Canadian Navy Supreme Allied Command Atlantic (SACLANT) Experience**

Cdr John Gabel (Ret'd). I joined the Navy in 1963 (at CMR St Jean) and graduated from RMC in 1968. Apart from my posting to SACLANT, I spent most of my time on the west coast, broken by a stint in Ottawa. I also served for a year with the UN in Central America (in both Honduras and Nicaragua).

In the late fall of 1994, I was advised by my Career Manager that the plan for me was a posting to SACLANT Staff in Norfolk Virginia. I was MARPAC N6 (Communications and Information Systems or CIS) and the SACLANT posting was to be in the Communications and Information Systems Division (CISD). In early 1995 I was selected to go as part of a NATO evaluation team for Exercise Strong Resolve 95, which was reinforcement of the northern flank of NATO (Norway).

NATO was developing the CJTF (Combined Joint Task Force concept or multiple nations, multiple services) and the exercise was to test work done to date. The exercise would also test the new NATO command and control system, MCCIS (Maritime Command and Control Information System) as well as an automated process for developing and promulgating Air Tasking Orders. The evaluation team would ride in USS Mt Whitney, the flagship for the NATO Strike Fleet, which also housed the Air and Naval Component Commanders for the exercise. The evaluation team joined Mt Whitney in Norfolk in early February and we sailed for Trondheim Norway on 09 Feb.

This was an enlightening experience and excellent preparation for the assignment to SACLANT. It certainly underscored the challenges for NATO to maintain effective interoperability in a growing coalition as well as taking advantage of the incredible advances in IT (information technology).

I moved to Norfolk in late July 95 and had a two-week turnover with my predecessor. It was like trying to drink out of a firehose. I was in a group of IT specialists: two American (1 navy air and 1 army) and an RAF communications officer. Our boss was an RN Captain; a small team with a

lot to do.

Part of my job was as a member of the Allied Naval Communications Agency (ANCA) which was established in 1951. Its responsibility was to ensure interoperability amongst the various NATO navies and to look at ways to improve information throughput, security and integrity. It was supported by a number of working groups including surface combatants, maritime air and submarines, each with their own unique requirements. The ANCA members met in plenary session twice a year to oversee the progress of the working groups and provide guidance or direction as required.

Apart from that there were a number of CIS initiatives underway at that time, some of which were:

- a. The Broadcast and Ship Shore (BRASS) project. This was intended to dramatically improve the data throughput in HF communications. A new standard had been developed and tested but implementation within NATO needed unanimous agreement of the nations.
- b. PCNet, was a small project intended to provide ships with limited (or no) satellite communications to exchange information using a laptop and HF/UHF communications.
- c. NATO Initial Data Transfer Service (NIDTS) was to implement a secure IP (Internet Protocol) network that could tie all NATO Headquarters and major operational units into a wide area data network. For the navies it would require SHF Satcom capability.
- d. Use of Video Conferencing capabilities, again for major headquarters and deployed formations.
- e. Support for the NATO PfP (Partner for Peace) initiative dealing with former Soviet Pact nations who were interested in joining NATO.
- f. Implementation of the X.400/500 message handling and addressing protocols, which were being considered for NATO systems.

- g. NATO Contingency Assets Pool (CAP). Communications and information systems that would be available to fit temporarily on units participating in an exercise or operation to enhance overall interoperability.

All this made for a challenging but interesting workload. One of the benefits was frequent travel to Europe (usually Brussels) for meetings with the nations and other NATO organisations.

In my third year I had the pleasure to participate in exercise Strong Resolve 98, again riding in the USS Mt Whitney. This time there were two components to the exercise, the Northern Crisis was again off Norway and involved reinforcement of the northern flank. Nations involved were Canada, Denmark, Luxemburg and Norway.

The Southern Crisis (led by Mt Whitney) was off Spain and Portugal simulating a peace support operation including PfP nations. Nations involved were Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, FYR Macedonia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey. The exercises started on 09 Feb and continued until 23 Feb, followed by a wash-up in Lisbon.

Some of the projects mentioned above were tested under realistic conditions. NIDTS was in place and allowed email and other data transfers from Mt Whitney to the major participants. Some CAP equipment had been purchased for the exercise and fitted in some participants enhancing the ability to share a common operating picture. Video conferencing was a key asset tying in senior commanders from SACLANT, NATOHQ and SACEUR. The "battle rhythm" usually had 6 separate conferences a day culminating in the final meeting between the Supreme Commanders, NATO HQ staff and the two Crisis commanders.

Back in Norfolk the challenge was how to best use the lessons learned, which took up the rest of my tour. I returned to Canada (west coast) in early September.