

# From the Well to the Helm in Six Weeks

## *One judge advocate's account of her participation in the Joint Warrior Exercise*

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**“MET?”**

**“I recommend Go, Sir.”**

**“N2?”**

**“I recommend Go.”**

**“OPS?”**

**“I recommend a Go, Sir.”**

**“LEGAD?”...**

As the chief of staff worked his way around our small group, I waited my turn to give my recommendation of either “go” or “no go” for the planned mission of landing the French marines on the shores of Caledonia.

Recommending a “go” would commence in less than 24 hours, the anticipated amphibious operation to engage and destroy the terrorist forces on Caledonian shores. Recommending a “no go” would mean scratching the mission and returning to the planning room. This was just one of the many difficult decisions I faced while acting as the sole legal advisor for the Combined Task Group (CTG) and its supporting forces during Joint Warrior 11-2.

Joint Warrior is a biannual military exercise in which the U.S. Navy has the opportunity to train and work alongside naval personnel from its NATO allies. The scenario, created by the Joint Training Exercise Planning Staff, started as a territorial dispute between two rival nations—Caledonia and Dragonia—that escalated in hostilities at sea, in the air, and on land.

Led by Commander, United Kingdom Task Group (COUKTG), the CTG included the crew of HMS Bulwark (L15)—the Royal Navy’s newest amphibious assault, command and control ship; Commander, Landing Force (the French marines); British and Danish frigates and destroyers; two submarines; and USS Arleigh Burke (DDG-51). Thirteen nations participated in the two-week exercise in the North Atlantic along the shores of Scotland. The multi-combat training evolutions and warfare exercises included anti-submarine exercises, live fire exercises, boardings, and amphibious landing operations.

My role was to serve as the legal advisor for the CTG, who commanded the multinational joint task force sent to serve as a peacekeeper between the two nations, a protector of the international shipping lanes, and a counterforce to piracy



and smuggling. I devoted a significant amount of time to reviewing rules of engagement and providing implementation guidance to the commanding officer and the battle staff. I also provided direct support to the CTG’s battle staff on matters of international maritime law and law of armed conflict.

The most challenging legal matter was employing NATO rules of engagement in coordination with the different British, French, and American interpretations of “hostile act” and “hostile intent” and their applications of self-defense. This was not a problem of a language barrier among the forces, but rather it was a challenge in working through the different nations’ philosophical differences in the application of rules of engagement to the particular operation. I quickly perceived how small differences in interpretations and in definitions of terms can impact operations at multiple levels, including at the tactical level. Working with the operational staff planners provided me the unique opportunity to learn firsthand the developing and planning stages of a mission. In return, this insight and close involvement assisted me in incorporating the necessary rules of engagement for successful mission accomplishment during the exercise.

Although the battle rhythm on the HMS Bulwark remained fairly consistent for most of the ship’s crew, it changed

daily for me and the rest of the battle staff as the exercise progressed. The Joint Warrior exercise planners quickly eroded the fragile relations among the two nations and the multinational force, escalating tensions by injecting acts of piracy, weapons smuggling, and terrorist acts into the scenario. As these incidents occurred, rules of engagement requests for warning shots, disabling fire, and boardings arrived at a faster pace from our subordinate ships and required a faster response time. I was constantly called upon at all times of the day and night to brief the commanding officer and the battle staff, to monitor “signals” (British term for messages) from our ships for rules of engagement requests, and to draft my own signals to send out to the fleet.

One of the most memorable experiences of Joint Warrior occurred on the last day of the exercise. On the previous day, one of our ships was fired upon by a Dragonian submarine. I was called out of my rack at 0400 to meet with the chief of staff and the rest of the battle staff. I pulled on my coveralls and hustled to the Combat

Information Center where the chief of staff and other staff members were assembled. The chief of staff quickly relayed that due to the prior attack, the captain wanted to engage three Dragonian vessels that appeared to be maneuvering into targeting positions near one of our ships. Fortunately for me

and the rest of the battle staff, the chief of staff recognized our foggy state of mind and suggested we reassemble in the wardroom lounge for tea and to discuss our options before the formal “go/no go” battle brief to the captain. Just as calm and collected as if we were sitting down for the daily 1600 tea and biscuits, the chief of staff asked that infamous question posed to judge advocates in the operational law arena, “JAG, can we shoot?” In that moment, I knew that I was truly out of the courtroom and in the fleet.

During the six weeks at sea, I was given the opportunity to experience, to observe, and to participate in a variety of underway activities. I stood watch with the DESRON 26 staff, monitoring and responding to messages from Sixth Fleet and Second Fleet. I observed replenishment at sea (RAS); visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) training; and mock boardings. I learned about combat operation systems and charting ship movement.

The DESRON 26 staff was particularly helpful in teaching me new operational acronyms and ship vocabulary, such as FIAC, CCOI, and PIM. I enjoyed a warm, spicy MRE (meal ready to eat and not military rules of evidence) and modeled the ship’s “battle dress” (British term for flash gear) for a day. I watched in awe as USS Arleigh Burke fired rounds into the cliffs of Cape Wrath. I was deferentially piped on

board HMS Bulwark at the beginning of the exercise, and then airlifted off at the end by the largest helicopter I have ever seen-- a HTUFT, which stands for “helicopter taken up from trade. I watched the French Marines and Royal Marines train on the flood deck for their amphibious operation while I did “phys” (British shorthand for PT) on the open deck above. I hitched a ride on one of the Landing Craft Utilities (LCUs) and caught the sun rise as we maneuvered out of the HMS Bulwark’s flood deck, across the flat water of Loch Eriboll towards shore to drop off an amphibious tank nicknamed “the beast.” With so many French Marines around, it was easy to brush up on my French, mainly “Bonjour” and “enchanté.” Regretfully, I did not have the opportunity to greet any Turkish officers with “Merhaba.”

Any remaining free time was spent either on the bridge watching the seas or in the briefing room chatting with other British officers on the differences in ship life on board British and American vessels.

Although the crews of both HMS Bulwark and USS Arleigh Burke were equally amiable and hospitable, there was quite a contrast in day-to-day living between the American destroyer and the new British flagship. HMS Bulwark’s spacious passageways and ladderwells, roomy staterooms, luxurious

wardroom with adjoining lounge and bar area, and daily tea or coffee and biscuits at 1000 and 1600 offered a completely different underway experience than my prior adventures on USS Arleigh Burke and on a frigate.

Having returned to solid land, sunny Florida, and to my normal routine as a trial counsel, I still marvel at all the accomplishments and experiences from Joint Warrior. I am currently trying to implement the “go/no go” methodology with my co-counsels when determining the prosecutorial merit of cases that our office receives. The transition from the well of the courtroom to the operational setting of Joint Warrior was not as difficult as I had expected. Instead of applying MREs (this time, military rules of evidence), I was applying ROEs; instead of arguing my interpretation of a case’s holding before a military judge, I was briefing the commanding officer of a multinational force task group on the NATO meanings of hostile intent and hostile act; and instead of reviewing rules for courts martial, I was interpreting or deciphering fragmentary orders (FRAGOs) and operation plans (OPLANs).

To all judge advocates who have the opportunity to participate in an exercise like this, my recommendation is the same as my reply to the chief of staff in the briefing room, “I recommend GO!” 🍪

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