

Good fun' of Thursday War keeps NATO forces prepared
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ABOARD HMS BRILLIANT - The planes arch high over Dorset's chalk cliffs, dive low near Henry VIII's castle atop Portland Bill and stab for the task force, weaving back and forth along the line of warships.

"We have a bogey!" shouts a radar operator on HMS Brilliant, the flagship. The helm swings around. Missile launchers rise. Guns boom.

For the Standing Naval Force Atlantic, NATO's peacetime navy, it's the culmination of a week in one of the world's toughest sea schools.

For the instructors of Britain's Portland sea training headquarters, it's just another Thursday War off the southwest coast of England. Each week, the Royal Navy's flag officer for sea training puts his charges through individual exercises involving maneuvering, gunnery, air defense, anti-submarine and anti-terrorist operations - then rolls them all into a single test simulating battle conditions. "We call it the Thursday War," says Capt. Rob Woodard, an easy-going close friend of the royal family who runs the operation. "We do everything to the ships from launching air strikes and to simulating chemical weapon attacks, throwing in real gas, starting fires, jamming communications, cutting power and flooding parts of the ship." "We're not satisfied until it's a smoldering wreck with all hands on deck gasping for air," adds Woodard, who was Nancy Reagan's escort at the 1981 wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. "It's good fun, actually." No wonder the men who train at Portland call the instructors the "wreckers." Up to 80 vessels a year - mostly British - come to Portland to be put through their paces. The full course can last up to seven weeks. In a recent exercise it was the NATO force's turn to endure the Thursday War. STANAVFORLANT is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's name for its standing navy in the Atlantic. It consists of between five and nine ships, each donated by one of NATO's 16 member nations. The command rotates annually. The force exercises throughout the ocean, showing the NATO flag, keeping tabs on the Soviet navy and in turn showing the Soviets how the Western allies operate their joint defense. In the event of war, it would be the nucleus of a much larger allied fleet. "It's very important that the Soviet navy sees that we work together, effectively, in one language," says Commodore A. Bruce Richardson of Britain, who assumed command of STANAVFORLANT on April 2. A former naval attache in Moscow, he was expelled last year when the Kremlin retaliated for Britain's ouster of Soviet spies. Richardson's staff is multinational, but all speak excellent English, and that's what the ships use to communicate with one another. For STANAVFORLANT, the Thursday War actually begins on a Wednesday. At dusk, the Brilliant and seven other ships - the destroyer USS Richard E. Byrd and frigates Skeena from Canada, Rheinland Pfalz from West Germany, Weilingen and Jan Van Brakel from the Netherlands, Stavanger from Norway and Commandante Roberto Ivens from Portugal - put into harbor under Portland Bill, a rocky peninsula crowned by a castle built for Henry VIII, father of Britain's navy. Inside the vast breakwater, they shut off their lights and radar and begin Operation Awkward, an exercise aimed at preventing an

attack in port from terrorists or enemy saboteurs. As helicopters and dinghies patrol the breakwater, British bomb disposal experts play the part of the saboteurs, trying to swim close enough to the ships to plant mines. Powerful sonar and an occasional grenade over the side are designed to disorient the attackers. Sentries scan the dark sea for bubbles. Below decks, crewmen listen for the clank of a metal mine against the metal hull. Just before 9 p.m., Brilliant's intercom crackles to life. "Officer of the watch, we have a diver on the surface, engaged." The first phase of the exercise over, the ships put their own divers in the water. "They have to be able to search the hull in the short time it would take an enemy to plant a mine and swim to safety," says Lt. Cmdr. Manuel Pires, the Portuguese staff officer who is supervising. At dawn, the shooting war begins. First, the Rhineland Pfalz and Jan Van Brakel hoist anchor and slip out into the early-morning mist. They play "orange force," the enemy. The rest of STANAVFORLANT plus a pair of British frigates getting Portland's full shakedown course form an escort to take a High Value Unit - navy jargon for a carrier, troop ship or important commercial vessel - out through a defensive minefield and fend off attacks from surface ships, submarines and planes. The High Value Unit is really a Royal Navy repair ship, Tidespring, like the Brilliant a veteran of the 1982 Falklands War. The warships steam away from the breakwater in single file and are still hemmed in by the minefield when the first air attack begins. Two Hunter fighters, based at nearby Yeovilton and flown by retired pilots, play the part of Soviet Forger attack planes. They roar over the fleet, wheeling and diving in simulated attack, as anti-aircraft guns open fire with blanks and missile crews practice training their weapons. In Brilliant's operations room, a Dutch officer, Lt. Cmdr. Jan Scherpenhuijsen, is in charge. "We're getting heavy jamming and spoofing of our radar and data and voice links," he says. "We've responded by kicking (switching to different frequencies)." It's no mean feat to "kick" in a multilingual navy, and from time to time, a ship gets lost in the shuffle. As the vessels emerge from the "minefield" into open water, a helicopter from the Brilliant detects the two "orange" vessels on radar. Two ships from the escort screen, Portugal's Roberto Ivens and Penelope, one of the Royal Navy "workup" ships, are dispatched to deal with the attackers. Meanwhile, another helicopter, trailing sonar microphones, detects the Royal Navy submarine HMS Oppossum and quickly drops a dummy torpedo into the water. As the air attacks continue, the hardest-hit is HMS Scylla. It's gassed and its engines are halted. His ship dead in the water, the captain breaks the tension by asking over the intercom, "Has anybody got a fishing line?" By noon, the Thursday War is over. The planes roar off into the distance, the ships head for Portland harbor.

Richardson is pleased with the performance. In a real war, he says, the small attacking force "wouldn't have had a chance." "It was an average Thursday War," says Woodard. Woodard seems to enjoy wrecking a ship, but for the men involved, he concedes it's no fun. "When the ship is flooding, the power is cut and gas is filling the operations room," he says, "no one is thinking it's just a game."

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