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Naval Forces in Support of
International Sanctions
The Beira Patrol

Adam B. Siegel

IN AUGUST 1990, AS THE UNITED STATES, in concert with other nations, moved toward the use of naval forces to cut off Iraq's trade flow, the U.S. government shied away from referring to a "blockade" of Iraqi ports due to the connotations this word carries.¹ The United States quickly sought United Nations authorization to sanction the use of force, if necessary, to interdict Iraqi shipping. At the time, many commentators called this an "unprecedented" and "historic" move by the U.S. government. This impression has continued unabated. As Bob Woodward wrote in *The Commanders*, "On Saturday, August 25, the United Nations Security Council voted to give the navies of the United States and other countries the right to use force to stop trade with Iraq. It was the first time in the U.N.'s 45-year history that individual countries outside an umbrella U.N. command were authorized to enforce an international blockade. . . ."²

Woodward is simply wrong. This was not the first time that naval forces have been used for interdiction operations to reinforce international sanctions; twenty-five years earlier the UN authorized an individual country to use force to implement an international blockade. In the 1960s, Royal Navy ships maintained the Beira Patrol, an operation instituted to enforce UN sanctions against Rhodesia.³

In November 1965, the United Nations Security Council called on all states to sever political and economic relations with Rhodesia. In December, the Royal Navy deployed the aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle* to provide air support for patrol operations designed to cut off the oil flow to Rhodesia through the port of Beira, Mozambique. By the end of the month, the Beira-Umtali oil pipeline was shut down, with no supplies reaching Beira.

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The British government remained aware of the political sensitivity of the situation. Even though the UN had voted overwhelmingly for sanctions, Britain specifically did not designate its operations a "blockade," nor did it authorize Royal Navy ships to use force to prevent oil flow to Rhodesia through the Beira-Umtali pipeline.

Since the Security Council resolution had not authorized the use of force to prevent Rhodesian oil imports, with hindsight, a challenge to the British ban seems to have been inevitable. In April 1966, the SS *Joanna V*, a Greek tanker on charter to a South African company, reached Beira despite interception by the frigate HMS *Plymouth* off the Mozambique coast. The *Plymouth's* orders had been to intercept and persuade ships not to break the UN embargo; its authorized tools of persuasion did not include the application of force. Following the *Joanna V* incident, Britain requested that the Security Council authorize the use of force to prevent oil from reaching Rhodesia via Beira.

On 9 April 1966, the Security Council authorized Britain (and Britain alone) to use force to cut the oil flow. Shortly thereafter, the frigate HMS *Berwick* stopped, boarded, and turned back another Greek tanker en route to Beira. Over the next two years, Royal Navy ships stopped twenty-eight vessels. The Royal Navy maintained the patrol into the 1970s as part of the UN sanctions against Rhodesia.

Initially the Royal Navy aircraft carriers *Ark Royal* and *Eagle* supported the patrols. At one point, the *Eagle* stayed at sea for seventy-one days, her aircraft flying over one thousand sorties in that period. The requirement for an aircraft carrier deployment diminished after RAF Shackleton patrol aircraft deployed to the Malagasy Republic (now Madagascar). Generally, the patrol consisted of two frigates supported by fleet auxiliaries and the Shackletons. In some ways, this was a difficult operation for the British to support. Due primarily to the distance from Britain and British bases, maintaining one ship on station required nine ships; thus, some eighteen ships were required to keep two on patrol off Mozambique. Over the first two years of operations, forty-eight Royal Navy vessels participated in the Beira Patrol. In the first nine months, eight tankers and six supply ships provided afloat support.

The difficulties should not be overestimated, however. In some ways the British faced far fewer problems than might be expected. The operations were conducted in a low or no-threat environment, with no serious expectation of a military threat to Royal Navy ships. As well, the operations were exclusively at sea, with no prospect of United Kingdom or international forces being put ashore to face the Rhodesian military. The flow of merchant shipping subject to inspection was not heavy, about one hundred ships a month. In addition, the Royal Navy was working independently and did not need to coordinate its actions with other actors. As well, the U.K. objectives were quite limited: to cut off oil flow to Rhodesia through Beira. In other words, the Royal Navy was

concerned about only one port of entry, for one type of Rhodesian import; it was not concerned with cutting off Rhodesia's international trade, with all its imports and exports. Finally, the British operated amidst wide international support—there was little question internationally who was in the right, under the circumstances.

This last feature is the only aspect of the Beira Patrol that can be clearly applied to the recent Persian Gulf operations. In contrast to the Beira Patrol, in 1990 the United States faced a serious potential threat from the Iraqi military, with a growing contingent of U.S. forces ashore in the region. Forces from many other nations were also present, and so issues of deconfliction and coordination had to be dealt with. All Iraqi trade, not just the one-way flow of one commodity, was subject to interdiction operations. Finally, unlike the peripheral impact of the Rhodesian sanctions, the situation in the Persian Gulf had (and has) serious implications for the world economy. Despite these differences, the Beira Patrol remains interesting as a precursor to the U.S. Navy operations in support of UN sanctions against Iraq.

Notes

1. That a blockade is an act of war—thus, during the Cuban missile crisis the U.S. Navy was used to enforce a "quarantine" and not a blockade of Cuba. See, for example, Sally V. Mallison and W. Thomas Mallison, Jr., "International Law and Naval History: Change and Continuity in the Juridical Doctrines of Naval Blockade," United States Naval Institute *Proceedings*, February 1976, pp. 44-53.

2. Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 285.

3. This brief discussion is based on F.E.C. Gregory, "The Beira Patrol," *RUSI*, December 1969, pp. 75-77; K. Young, *Rhodesia and Independence* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967); James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919-1979*, 2nd. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), pp. 123-129; "News from the Navies: United Kingdom, Beira Patrols," *Navy*, May 1966, p. 164; Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975-1977), 3 v.; and Johan Galtung, "On the Effects of International Economic Sanctions, with Examples from the Case of Rhodesia," *World Politics*, April 1967, pp. 378-416.

"The only decision that was mine was what was important and what was not."

Edith Bolling Wilson

(on her role in the White House after the incapacitation of President Wilson by stroke in September 1919)