

HMCS ASSINIBOINE and the 1974 Portuguese Coup or "Where was this covered in command exams?"

by *Captain Robert H. Thomas, RCN, Ret'd*

In the spring of 1974, Portugal had been in political turmoil for some time, with dissent focused within the Army over policies in overseas Portuguese territories. In Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau revolution and terrorism had challenged the Portuguese colonial administrations for over a decade. An attempted coup on March 16, led by junior officers opposed to the extreme right-wing government, had failed, lulling the government into complacency. Six weeks later, a second military coup succeeded and seized power.

HMCS ASSINIBOINE found herself in the middle of the coup. She was part of a NATO fleet scheduled to assemble in Lisbon and to sail at first light on April 25. The timing of the coup had been planned, in part, to follow the departure of the fleet to ensure that the Tagus would be free of foreign warships. {1} The vagaries of the sea intervened.

In the morning of April 22, while en route to Lisbon, ASSINIBOINE sighted a small Grenadian merchant vessel, the *Trade Mariner*, which had been adrift without power for eight days. Day-long attempts to repair her engine were unsuccessful so ASSINIBOINE took her in tow and headed for Lisbon, 350 miles away. This delayed ASSINIBOINE's arrival until 11:00 a.m. on April 24. However, Captain Jock Allen, Commander of the Canadian Task Group, approved a 48 hour stay in Lisbon.

On arrival, ASSINIBOINE secured outboard of several other warships and had to shift very early on April 25 to permit the others to sail as planned for the exercise. The pilot in charge of the move arrived late, almost incoherent and complaining of a traffic jam in the city. A "cold" shift by tug to the anchorage duly commenced at just before 7:00 a.m. {2} Two members of ASSINIBOINE's ship's company were left ashore to move a rental vehicle to the Doca de Marinho, where the ship was due to move.

At anchor, permission could not be received to move alongside and it soon became clear that something serious was going on. The pilot was talking to authorities ashore but either could not, or would not, explain what was happening. In fact, unbeknownst to us, the coup had started at 3:00 that morning and the Army had moved rapidly to seize control of the city.

Shortly after 9:00 a.m. a Portuguese frigate, the *Almirante Gago Coutinho*, approached ASSINIBOINE. She was clearly at action stations and circled around us. Our reaction was to go to a higher degree of watertight integrity but to take no overt action which might be perceived as threatening or provocative by the Portuguese. At the same time, we were giving serious thought as to what to do if she attempted any hostile action. What we did not know was that the Army was equally uncertain about the frigate's intentions and had tanks ready to fire at it if it took hostile action. However, in mid-morning, after its officers had apparently refused the orders of the Captain to fire on the city, the ship elevated its guns skyward and withdrew. {3}

We were finally ordered to remain at anchor at 10:00 a.m. hours due to political unrest ashore. To find out what was going on, the Commanding Officer, Commander Robin Corneil, took a small party ashore at 10:25 in an attempt to meet the Canadian Ambassador and seek his instructions.

Meanwhile, our two sailors ashore had blissfully driven to the ship's destination and parked, only to hear gunfire and witness considerable commotion. Here members of the PIDE (International Police for Defence of the State) had barricaded themselves in their headquarters across the street and fired indiscriminately into the crowd. {4} Ultimately, five individuals were killed and many more wounded - the only bloodshed in the coup. {5}

On his trip ashore, Commander Corneil first spoke to Commander Gregor MacIntosh of HMCS *Yukon* which was about to sail from back to Canada after participating in The NATO Standing Naval Force Atlantic

(STANAVFORLANT).{6} Meanwhile, the boat's crew was standing by a railing around the square watching the gunfire! Commander Corneil called the Canadian Embassy and was advised by the Second Secretary that there did not appear to be any danger to Canadians. He then contacted the Canadian Ambassador, R. Duhamel, seeking advice and direction. He was unable to get any specific direction from him, being told repeatedly to "do what your superiors tell you to do". After these many repetitions, Corneil finally said "Mr. Ambassador, you *are* my superior officer, until you decide what you want me to do!" He was then advised to get back to the Embassy.

Shortly afterwards, the American Assistant Naval Attaché, in plain clothes, approached Commander Corneil. He was fluent in Portuguese and described what was going on. From this, Corneil was able to give the Embassy a detailed account of events and the uncertainty of the Portuguese naval officers present who did not want to leave the Doca until they were certain who was going to win. At 12:18 the Commander Corneil returned to the ship, having picked up the two members of ASSINIBOINE's ship's company who were ashore.

There were other Canadian complications ashore. A Canadian Air Force *Argus* detachment from Greenwood was at the international airport at Portela which had been seized at 3:30 that morning by a unit of the officer training school.{7} Several personnel had brought spouses to Lisbon and were with them in downtown hotels. There was no way of contacting them or ensuring their safety, but the swiftness and lack of violence in the coup prevented any harm coming their way.

By mid-afternoon it was clear that there was nothing further we could do. Therefore, we weighed anchor shortly before 3:00 p.m. and sailed slowly down the Tagus, watching the activities of crowds ashore, especially their rapid dispersal when a tank suddenly appeared at an intersection.

The author was the Executive Officer of HMCS ASSINIBOINE at the time.

Notes:

1. Michael Harsgor. *Portugal in Revolution*, The Washington Papers, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications), 1976, p. 21.
2. All times are taken from the log of HMCS ASSINIBOINE for April 1974. (Times have been converted to a.m./p.m. and rounded out in some places - Editor)
3. *Insight on Portugal* (London: Times Newspapers Limited, Andre Deutch, 1975), p. 83.
4. Harsgor, p. 22.
5. *Insight*, p. 96.
6. All details of Commander Corneil's activities ashore are from a letter to the author 11 Jan 98.
7. *Insight*, p. 84-5.

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