

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH CAPTAIN ROBERT WAGNER, COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER DALLAS VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, AUGUST 29, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): With us today on the Bloggers Roundtable we've got Captain Robert Wagner, who is the commanding officer of the U.S. Coast Guard ship the Dallas. And Captain Wagner, thank you for joining us for the Bloggers Roundtable today.

CAPT. WAGNER: It's my pleasure to be with you all.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Do you have an opening statement for us?

CAPT. WAGNER: Sure. I'll go ahead and start off by -- I know I spoke to several of you, I think it was almost a month ago today -- (audio break) -- some of Dallas's work earlier, but Dallas has been deployed in support of the Naples, Italy-based 6th Fleet for about three months, now. And as part of our operations, two days ago, Wednesday the 27th, we participated in Operation Assured Delivery. We delivered about 76 -- a little over 76,000 pounds of humanitarian assistance supplies to Batumi, Georgia, that will ultimately be distributed to the estimated 100,000 people that have been displaced within Georgia by the conflict with Russia.

As for the supplies that we carried, it consisted of basic hygiene items such as soaps and toothpaste and tooth brushes; infant care items such as diapers and baby wipes; and some food items such as energy bars, UHT milk and boxed juices.

I can tell you that Dallas received an amazingly warm welcome by the people in Batumi. I've never seen anything like that in my 23 years of service. It was sort of -- truly a moving experience. It was a proud day to be an American and to be part of the American military, and it was something that I'll never forget.

So I guess with that opening statement, Jack, I'll turn it back over to you for questions.

MR. HOLT: All right. Andrew, you were first on the line -- excuse me, you were first on the line, so why don't you get us started?

Q Captain, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin, from U.S. Naval Institute's Proceedings and Get the Gouge. Good to talk to you again, sir.

CAPT. WAGNER: Good to hear you again here, Andrew.

Q Thank you. Captain, the past couple days the papers have been reporting that I guess you were -- your ship was being used as kind of a bargaining chip with the Russian government about whether you were going to go to Poti or Batumi. Could you have gone into Poti, had conditions allowed it?

Is the port in good enough shape to put people down on the ground, if required?

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, let me answer that question up front by saying that basically we went to best place, where we could most efficiently get the supplies to the people that need it. And that decision was made to be Batumi.

As far as the physical readiness of the port or the physical condition of the port, my understanding is that the commercial port in Poti is open for normal business at this time.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Grim?

Q Yes, sir. I was curious as to who you were -- who your liaison was in Georgia that you were turning over these supplies to. Do we have people on the ground there who are taking it and distributing it through the Georgian military, or are you dealing with them directly?

CAPT. WAGNER: The lead federal agency for the humanitarian assistance overseas is the Department of State. So we're -- we as -- (inaudible) -- I say "we" because it's -- really the Navy task force that I'm a part of was working to deliver the supplies to them. And through USAID and a number NGOs working in country is really the distribution mechanism for those supplies.

Q So it's our civilian agencies that are taking the lead on that?

CAPT. WAGNER: Correct.

Q Thank you.

CAPT. WAGNER: I would look at it and say I really had one of the easy jobs, which was merely transporting those supplies. It took a lot of effort to get them to us. And then, once we get them to Batumi, the real work began to get those to the people who need the supplies.

Q Thank you, Captain. MR. HOLT: All right. Chuck?

Q Hi. Good morning, Captain.

Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. I wanted to ask about the loading and unloading of those supplies. What kind of equipment does Dallas have to do that loading and unloading? And were the Georgians equipped to do the unloading on your arrival?

CAPT. WAGNER: Sure, Chuck. Good question. Really now, when it comes to bulk cargo, we're not designed to carry bulk cargo. What we did is when we were in Souda Bay, Crete, we had a pierside crane that -- (inaudible) -- palletized material and loaded the pallets onto our flight deck. And then when

we got to Georgia, in Batumi, there was a crane that was ready, came alongside - - it was a barge crane that came alongside the ship and basically picked up the pallets and put them onto the pier. From there they had trucks ready. A forklift picked it up from the pier and put it straight on board the trucks. I think the entire off-load process took right around four hours from the time the barge got alongside until the 80th pallet of supplies made it to the pier.

Q So you had 80 pallets total? They had 80 pallets?

CAPT. WAGNER: Yes, sir.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. And Jim.

Q Hey, Captain, Jim Dolbow with Unofficial Coast Guard Blog. Glad we didn't scare you away after the last call -- your last roundtable. I was -- this has been a very historic deployment for the Dallas. I was wondering if you were working with like the Coast Guard Historian's Office to document and preserve all the -- your activities and memories for future generations.

CAPT. WAGNER: We -- in anticipation of this deployment, I actually brought a Coast Guard photojournalist along with us. And she was cataloguing pretty much everything that we've been doing in photographs, videos. And a number of those have been turned over. In fact, I understand on CNN yesterday, the commodore that I'm working for, Commodore John Moore, who's in charge of the task force, had a live feed on CNN, and she was actually credited with some of the photos that were being broadcast on CNN during that interview. So she's been doing a great job for us and got a lot of photos.

Q Outstanding. MR. HOLT: Okay. David?

Q Hi, it's David Axe with Wired, DANGER ROOM. Sorry. There's background noise here. I'm kind of surrounded.

Sir, why a cutter to deliver just 76,000 pounds of humanitarian supplies? What -- I don't understand, because that's really just two C-17 loads. It seems like a highly inefficient means of getting humanitarian supplies into Georgia.

CAPT. WAGNER: I don't know exactly what the cargo capacity of various aircraft are and what aircraft would be available to bring things in. I know that I had one aircraft -- the last load that I had brought -- I believe it was 14 pallets, so -- it may have been on a C-130. I really don't know. But when you think about how some of the supplies got to me, some of them were -- (inaudible) -- staged that someone needed to get there.

But I think the larger part is that the Coast Guard and the Navy and the Marine Corps had a strategy that was drawn in by the three service chiefs, about a year ago, talking about a strategy for 21st century --

Q So you don't --

CAPT. WAGNER: Can you hear -- (inaudible) -- there's a lot of background noise. I'm not sure I can -- you can hear me okay?

Q I know. I'm sorry. I'm in a public place. It's hard to find total peace and quiet. Yes, I did hear you okay. But I -- so -- but I'm still wondering really just to the -- speaking to the general issue of whether a ship is an efficient means of carrying -- especially a cutter that's not designed for bulk cargo, you know, what -- or, well, for any kind of cargo -- what's -- is this really an efficient means of transporting supplies?

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, I think, between the McFaul and myself --

Q (Inaudible.)

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, again, I just -- one, we are a platform that was available for the 6th Fleet to be able to use for this. But I think between the McFaul and myself, we delivered almost a quarter of the total supplies that have been brought in.

So, really, sealift is actually a pretty economical means to do this, when all is said and done.

Q Thank you very much. I'll have follow-ups when we come back around. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Darren (sp).

Q Yeah. I understand from the commandant's comments that you might have had auxiliary linguists on board at some point in this deployment. Can you speak to that?

CAPT. WAGNER: Yes, we do. We've got -- I actually have one Coast Guard auxiliary on board. The Coast Guard Auxiliary actually has a linguist program, and we were able to tap into that program for various languages, both within West Africa and here in the Black Sea and Mediterranean.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Had a couple other folks chime in there. Who else is with us?

Q Austin Bay, Jack.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Austin. Go ahead, sir.

Q Was there an opening statement? I got on at 9:01. I don't know if I missed Captain Wagner's opening statement or not.

MR. HOLT (?): Yeah. Well, yeah, you probably did.

Q Well, I'm just going to go ahead and stand -- and go. And this is my question about the operation, Captain.

Wasn't this really a demonstration of will by the United States? I mean, a Coast Guard cutter is not quite a U.S. naval ship. I know we've sent U.S. Navy ships into Georgia again, but really wasn't this a signal that we're going to operate in the Black Sea and that we've got sea reinforcement capability? Really wasn't that what this was about?

CAPT. WAGNER: I don't think so at all. This was about getting humanitarian aid to the people who need it. And we were expecting to have unencumbered access to the port, and that's exactly what I received.

Q And that's not a demonstration of will by the United States to act in a situation where Russia has used -- launched an offensive against a U.S. ally?

CAPT. WAGNER: I don't believe it is. There's the Montreux Convention that actually limits when ships can come through the -- through the Black Sea. It was fortunate that I was scheduled for some activities. There's an -- operations here within the Black Sea and as part of those, I was able to go in and put supplies on and comply with the Montreux Convention.

Q May I ask one quick follow-up, Jack?

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q All right. Let's talk about Montreux Convention and the control of the ships going through the Turkish straits. Has Turkey -- which is a NATO ally, but it's also got complete control of moving shipping through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus -- has Turkey been -- what is -- let me put this way.

What has Turkey's attitude been towards movement of military vessels through the straits since the Russo-Georgia war began?

CAPT. WAGNER: Bill, I really don't know the answer to that question. I know that I was able to come through the Turkish Straits on schedule. So there was no impact to my schedule.

Q Well, no, that's what -- the reason I asked that is that there's a -- I noticed in the Early Bird this morning there was an opinion piece asking about that. And I appreciate your answer, sir. Thank you.

CAPT. WAGNER: Thank you.

Q Well, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. That sounds like something for State Department there.

CAPT. WAGNER: Yup.

MR. HOLT: Somebody else joined us? Anybody else on line that hasn't had a round?

Q Well, this is John Donovan. I probably came in right after Austin did.

The only thing I had was clarification. When David from DANGER ROOM was asking his question, I couldn't quite catch the captain's response, because of the background noise in, I guess, David's end. But the question, as I understood it, was the efficiency of using the ships and -- vice C-17s, an I couldn't catch whether or not there was a discussion of the utility of diverting C-17s, which are also busy resupplying Afghanistan and Iraq, and using an available asset that was just out there that could do that and already skedded to head that way anyway.

CAPT. WAGNER: Right. Again, I don't know what the aircraft schedules were or anything like that. I do know that the amount of supplies that McFaul? and I carried were almost a quarter of what's been delivered to Georgia. And traditionally, sealift is a fairly efficient way to move bulk supplies like this.

So that -- really, again, I don't know about the aircraft schedule. Q And -- that's okay.

Again, I just kind of wanted to make sure I had the answer right. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. And --

CAPT. WAGNER: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay. So, anybody with any follow-ups?

Q Yeah, I do.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Captain, Andrew Lubin again. To follow up on Austin Bay's question, wouldn't the Georgians take you as a presence in the -- in their port? I mean, you've unloaded everything. If you're there just to deliver stuff and leave, I'd understand, but if you're there for a couple days, you've got the American flag and you're the standard-bearer. Why would they not look at you as a -- as a presence?

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, I think what I -- I was just in port for a little over -- (inaudible) -- hours yesterday or Wednesday, I should say. So it really wasn't a long visit at all. It was -- we went in. As soon as the crane was alongside, we started to off-load. And once the crane was finished, we began our departing preparations and left the harbor that evening before sunset.

So that's how the mission was --

Q Oh, okay. I'm sorry. I mean, I thought you were still in port. I apologize. Okay.

CAPT. WAGNER: No, no. No. We're back out at sea, and my mission was to deliver the supplies and that's what we did.

Q Okay, fair enough. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anyone else?

Q Yeah. This is Chuck Simmins again. Captain, were you accompanied by any other naval vessels on your trip into Batumi -- foreign naval vessels, NATO allies? And did you encounter any naval vessels during your trip, either NATO or Russian? CAPT. WAGNER: Sure, Chuck. Well, first of all, I will say that early that morning, the McFaul -- I did rendezvous with the McFaul outside of Georgian territorial seas -- Commodore Moore, who's the commander of Task Force 367 and who I'm working for right now, who's using the McFaul as his flagship.

So we rendezvoused with them and did a personnel transfer so that the commodore and one of his staff could come over and be on Dallas when we actually went into the port. And so McFaul stayed offshore while we went into port, and then later that evening I rendezvoused with McFaul again and sent the commodore back over to them. So there was a U.S. ship that was near Batumi at the time, but it was for a logistics reason.

We did see one Russian Federation naval ship that was out there. He basically was very professional. We never spoke to him. He just basically passed us and went on his way. I think he was just curious as to what we had on our deck.

Q Captain, are you able to identify that vessel, or at least the class of the vessel?

CAPT. WAGNER: I believe it was Krivak frigate if I recall. But again, it was -- they were very professional in their actions. They did not impede us in any way.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

Q Jack, I had a follow.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Sorry.

MR. HOLT: We had two folks there. I'll try this again.

Q Jack, Jim Dolbow with the Unofficial Coast Guard Blog.

Captain, you touched upon it in your opening statement, but can you just give us a little more detail about Georgian hospitality and how the crew -- you and your crew have won the hearts and minds of the Georgian people in your short visit?

CAPT. WAGNER: Sure. Yeah, we -- yeah, because of the nature of our visit, we really didn't have the crew go out in town at all. In fact, they never left their security perimeter.

I was the only one who did that, and I made a call on the regional governor and the head of the Coast Guard. But once we got there, the streets and the piers were basically lined with well over a thousand who were applauding and cheering as we arrived. There were American flags flying from many different places. It was an arrival ceremony that we were going to have on the pier with the military and the local government, and the citizens of Batumi basically wanted to get closer to the ceremony itself just to be able to express their heartfelt thanks to Americans for the aid that we are providing.

You know, I was -- I felt very privileged to be the focal point of America, I guess, to some extent, because, you know, we were representing all that America is bringing to Georgia through that aid, and you know, I was the one that was able to look into the eyes and at the smiles of, you know -- (inaudible) -- and some very small children, and just see hope in the supplies that we were delivering. So it was really a moving experience.

Q Thank you, Captain.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Hi. David Axe, I have a follow-up.

CAPT. WAGNER: Okay, David.

Q Great. Sorry about that background noise, everyone.

So my question is, we're -- the -- was the Dallas' self-defense capability ever an issue? Did you feel confident going into a fairly tense environment, you know, sort of lightly equipped as you are?

CAPT. WAGNER: David, again, we were on a humanitarian mission, and you know, we were expecting full access, full cooperation from the Russian navy, and that's really what we had. I never felt that our safety was in jeopardy.

Q Well, you know, there was sort of a major sea battle there in a that vicinity just a couple weeks back. I mean, this is not a typical environment for anybody, really. I mean, surely you were conscious of that.

CAPT. WAGNER: We certainly will take necessary precautions -- (inaudible) -- the capability of the ship wherever we are, if I'm doing my normal operations down in the Caribbean versus the drug smugglers or if I'm over here in the Black Sea. But you know, I just will tell you that I felt very safe while we were there, and that's exactly what I told the crew.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

CAPT. WAGNER: You're welcome.

Q Chuck Simmins again.

Captain, first of all, pass on to your photographer my compliments. As a serious amateur, I'm seeing wonderful images come out of that -- out of that trip.

I wanted to ask you about your interaction with the Georgian Coast Guard because a couple of the photos that I've seen show Georgian Coast Guard vessels nearby. Were you able to have any interaction with your counterparts at all?

CAPT. WAGNER: Sir, the interactions we had, we had an escort from -- about their territorial sea back into the port and then escorted back out. Once we were inside the port itself, we had Georgian Coast Guard assets that provided security for us.

And I would add that those are standard procedures wherever we go. Even when I was down in Africa, we would have a host nation patrol boat escort us into the piers. So it's more of a security posture. It's more of what we have to do now in the post-Cole environment around the world.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

CAPT. WAGNER: You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anything else?

Q Sure. Daren Lewis with the Official Coast Guard Blog.

Just a follow-up on that. Do you have any feeling for the state of the Georgian Coast Guard forces currently?

CAPT. WAGNER: Hi, Daren.

We -- I did get an opportunity to speak with the commandant of the Georgian Coast Guard. It was my understanding that up in the Poti area and a little bit to the north of these some of their facilities were destroyed and some of their vessels were destroyed as well. But where we were down in Batumi, their fleet was operational, from what I could see, or I believe I saw three vessels that were under way inside the harbor or escorting us. And there's certainly will to move ahead from where they are.

Q Yes. Thank you, sir, and thanks to your crew for this great service.

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, thank you. Yeah, they've done a fantastic job. I couldn't be more proud of them.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

And thank you --

Q Jack, I have one other question.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sure.

Q Again, thanks for doing this, Captain Wagner, and thanks for doing -- taking on -- taking on this mission.

This may be another question Jack would say, "Austin, you need to ask the State Department." But heck, you're the Coast Guard, and as you said, the State Department's lead agency on this.

CAPT. WAGNER: I'm not sure the State Department's speaking to us after the last interview we did with them.

Q (Laughs.) Well, I don't -- I don't know about that. But I -- I'm not -- I don't -- but on -- how does supplying humanitarian aid, this kind of action, work -- dovetail with, work with, forward diplomatic action or long-term political responses to Georgia's situation? You said that the Georgian people were ecstatic; they were glad to see us there. What is -- what part does what the USS Dallas did play in a new diplomatic or political resolution?

CAPT. WAGNER: Well, first of all, I have to say USCGC Dallas. The USS Dallas --

Q I'm sorry, sir; I know you're a Coast Guard cutter. I apologize.

CAPT. WAGNER: (Laughs.) But you know, wow, that's quite a question. I really don't even know how to answer that. You know, that's a lot higher than really my mission, which is to deliver the supplies. And you know, I don't know how that is.

I was tasked to bring 38 tons of humanitarian assistance supplies to Batumi, and you know, that's really what we did. I do think you'd have to ask somebody else that question.

MR. HOLT: And if I -- well, if I might say so, it's also -- it does dovetail through with the stated new maritime strategy has been --- that was -- been talked about for about the past year now with -- between the Navy and the Coast Guard.

CAPT. WAGNER: I guess I'll -- you know, from this aspect, when you look at the -- again, the -- I believe the official name is the Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower, and that was signed by the CNO, the commandant of the Marine Corps and the commandant of the Coast Guard last October. And really that strategy talks about how the naval services can bring the forces and competencies of all three services together to best advance global maritime safety and security.

One of the things that's specifically listed in the strategy is humanitarian assistance. So if (we ?) are pulled into the mission for the Sixth Fleet, part of Operation Assured Delivery really dovetails right into the cooperative strategy. But that goes beyond into the country, and the national strategy inside the country itself, I really can't speak to that.

MR. HOLT: All right. Okay, well, we're just about out of time here. So, Captain, appreciate you joining us. Captain Robert Wagner is the commanding officer of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Dallas. Thank you very much for being with us, and thank you, sir, for your service.

CAPT. WAGNER: Oh, it's been my pleasure to be back with the Bloggers Roundtable. I had a great time last time, and I was ecstatic when I got asked to come back and do it again.

MR. HOLT: All right. Excellent, sir. We look forward to further engagement with you.

CAPT. WAGNER: All right, sir.

Q Captain, thanks very much.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you.

Q Thanks for carrying out the mission.

END.