**Operation Praying Mantis**

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**Introduction**

*Operation Praying Mantis* was a planned naval response by the United States to Iranian aggression in the Persian Gulf that occurred on 18 April 1988. This naval operation is worthy of analyses because of its particular importance for a number of reasons, namely:

* It represented the largest US naval surface engagement since World War II.
* The first exchange of anti-ship missiles involving US surface combatants arguably reinforced the role of the US as the ‘policeman’ of the region.
* The effective application of force projection.

The operation also represented the first use of real-time communications technology that allowed senior naval personnel and the President, based in the United States, to communicate directly with commanders in the field. It is further asserted that the result of the operation contributed to the end of the Iran/Iraq War, and established a baseline for western action in the Persian Gulf area for many subsequent years. It provided a clear example of a nation securing freedom of navigation and lines of communication in a conflict zone. An interesting corollary also resides in the operation being representative of the ‘New Maritime Strategy’ of the 1980s that espoused counterforce measures and forward deployment.

**Historical Background**

Since the discovery of vast reserves of oil in the early 20th century the Persian Gulf region has held a significant place in international affairs. Following the Second World War, the British government, through its navy, managed a presence in the region designed to protect the valuable natural resource, with mixed outcomes. This role ceased in 1971 and was not taken up until 1979 when the US administration, through the Carter Doctrine, took on a regional presence based on the ‘Twin Pillars’ of Iran and Saudi Arabia, then major suppliers of international oil.1 This role was stepped up in 1980 with the commencement of the Iraq/Iran War that saw an invasion of Iran by Iraq in order to expand its territory and increase its coastline on the Persian Gulf. A key aspect of this conflict was attacks by both sides on shipping that was perceived by each to be supplying or contributing to the other nation, especially oil tankers, and included vessels flagged under any nation, but that which tended to avoid those of US ownership.2As this action was not in the form of direct attacks on the enemy, but took the form of commerce raiding on merchant vessels, it can be considered a form of *guerre de course*.

In mid-1987 the government of Kuwait appealed to both the US and USSR for specific protection of their fleet of tankers.3Seeing an opportunity to keep Soviet interests out of the Persian Gulf region, the U.S. formulated *Operation Earnest Will* in order to provide protection to Kuwaiti oil tankers traversing the danger zone. Opponents of the plan in the US cited both legal and risk of escalation objections that were overcome by the re-flagging of the Kuwaiti tankers under the US flag and installing a proportion of American crews to man them.4This step essentially placed the vessels under US ownership and was designed to afford a degree of surety of safety. However, it also set the scene for future events, and almost guaranteed escalated US involvement in the conflict.

**Operation Earnest Will**

Operation Earnest Will was, in effect, a return to the convoy escort activities of WWII in the Battle of the Atlantic. These actions were augmented through an increase in naval commitment of 30 vessels, with more to follow over time. Congruently, US force commanders were advised that whilst existing rules of engagement (ROE) applied, they were given greater freedom to interpret the meaning of hostile intent, and thus were not required to wait until fired upon to retaliate, but to ensure their ship was protected if threatened.5This later development was largely influenced by USS Stark incident of May 1987, when an Iraqi aircraft fired two Exocet missiles that struck the ship resulting in the deaths of 37 crewmembers. Ensuing investigations revealed that the ship’s preparation and response were inadequate, and the incident could/should have resolved differently.6Interestingly, Iraqi claims that the incident was purely accidental went largely unchallenged.7



Figure 1. The Scope of Operation Praying Mantis in the Persian Gulf8

June 1987 saw the first *Earnest Will* convoy under way comprising the supertanker *Bridgeton* and the LPG carrier *Gas Prince*, escorted by three US Navy warships. Inauspiciously, it was the *Bridgeton* that, having stuck a mine, became the effective escort for the naval vessels, as her large bulk afforded more protection than the smaller ships. This incident, whilst the only time a USN escorted convoy suffered weapons damage, highlighted the risk and vulnerability posed by sea mines. Consequently, a concerted effort to increase mine countermeasures in the Persian Gulf region was begun that included both minesweeping vessels and helicopters.

The following nine months saw a time of consistently successful escorted convoys, but with multiple attacks by Iraq and Iran on vessels flagged by nations not represented in the Gulf by warships. Similarly, Iran kept up its mining efforts which were evidenced by the interception and capture of an Iranian vessel, *Iran Ajr*, which was in the process of minelaying.9This action provided photographic evidence of Iranian activity and served as support for *Operation Praying Mantis* the following year.

On 14 April USS *Samuel B. Roberts*, a Guided Missile Frigate (FFG), having been in the Persian Gulf on patrol and escort duties for two months, strikes a mine whilst attempting to back down over its course having sighted mines in the water ahead. The resulting explosion tore a large hole in the hull and ignited several large fires. The effort of the officers and crew to save the ship is regarded as an exemplar of damage control at sea, and fortunately no lives were lost.10The ship was thus saved and eventually returned to service. What followed over the course of the next four days was a singular example of determination and commitment in planning and executing an armed response to this perceived act of aggression by a nation state.

It is claimed that even before concrete evidence of Iranian involvement in the *Roberts* mining (acquired by navy divers matching serial numbers on captured mines), the commander of Joint Task Force Middle East (JTFME), Rear Admiral A. Less had received orders to draw up plans to retaliate.11Less and his staff passed on their recommendations for reducing Iran’s ability to mine the Gulf through attacks on ports, weapons storage facilities, and minelayers. With these in hand President Reagan and his advisors settled on a ‘proportional’ response aimed at meeting military desires, but also limiting the risk of escalation that might have occurred should the US attack Iranian territory.12Thus it was determined to destroy two Iranian oil platforms that not only produced natural gas, but were used for surveillance and command and control purposes. Permission was also granted for the sinking of one Iranian warship and a third oil platform should the later target not eventuate. Consequently, two messages were transmitted. The first, a diplomatic missive to Iran protesting the mining of international waters, and secondly, an order to draw up plans for what became *Operation Praying Mantis*.

**Operation Praying Mantis**

Rear Admiral Less issued orders to form three Surface Action Groups (SAGs) comprising three vessels that would each attack one of the oil platforms, and a third made up of four vessels, that would hunt for an Iranian warship. The first action group SAG Bravo was tasked with attacking the *Sassan* oil platform using ships weapons to suppress resistance, and then assault the facility using a Marine reconnaissance team to lay charges and destroy it. The second group, SAG Charlie was to attack the *Sirri-D* platform and then have members of SEAL Team Two board and destroy it with explosives. Meanwhile, the third group, SAG Delta, would hunt for an Iranian warship with the task of engaging and sinking it. Intelligence advised that the most effective target would be the *Sabalan*, a frigate whose captain had gained a reputation of merciless attacks against unarmed merchant vessels which deliberately targeted crew.13Air support would be provided by the air wing of the USS *Enterprise* in the form of a Surface Combat Air Patrol (SUCAP) and radar surveillance aircraft, with aerial re-fuelling and AWACs support provided by the Air Force.

Both SAG Bravo and Charlie, in keeping with the non-escalatory and proportional nature of the response, gave the occupants of their respective targets five minutes warning in both English and Farsi to evacuate before being fired upon. At both targets some personnel were seen to be evacuating and were given a chance to do so, but others carried out armed resistance that was soon suppressed by the ships guns and their helicopters. In the case of SAG Bravo at the *Sassan* platform, the Marine detachment laid charges after gathering intelligence data, and destroyed the structure. Whereas at the *Sirri* platform, gunfire from SAG Charlie’s vessels caused a large gas fire that prevented the SEAL team landing and which subsequently destroyed the platform.

At this point in the action it can be observed that the Iranian response to attacks on their assets was almost non-existent. They were surely aware as evidenced by intercepted radio transmissions from the oil platforms, but in defence, the already battered command structure of the Iranian defence forces was dealing with a major Iraqi land offensive that broke the same morning on the Faw (Fao) Peninsula.14It was not until late in the morning that a group of small craft including Swedish made Boghammer speedboats sortied into the Southern Gulf area from Abu Masa and indiscriminately fired upon ships, oil platforms and other craft with machine guns and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs).

In what marks a watershed moment in these events, two of these non-US flagged vessels called for help. Admiral Less requested permission to assist from his superiors in Washington and within minutes President Reagan gave the go ahead. Up to this point the conditions of Earnest Will had prevented the US assisting foreign vessels under attack. Shortly after, two A-6 Intruder aircraft from *Enterprise* attacked and destroyed two of the Boghammers, and forced the rest to flee and beach themselves. Significantly, this event demonstrated the impact of advances in communications technology in allowing commanders at all levels to influence tactical operations from across the globe. A development welcomed by some, but which alarmed others. It can also be argued that this event represents one of the first real forays into a systems oriented battlefield control.

Almost simultaneously, an Iranian fast attack craft *Joshan* was detected sailing toward SAG Charlie. This, in conjunction with the speedboat attacks, represented the first stirrings of an Iranian response. Indeed, the presence of *Joshan* posed a dilemma for Admiral Less as it, at 275 tons, was significantly smaller than the desired target of *Sabalan*, at 1540 tons. However, it was known to possess the only known Harpoon anti-ship missile in the Iranian arsenal.15This intelligence was deemed accurate as it was the US that sold these and other weapons, to Iran prior to the revolution of 1979 that saw the Shah overthrown and the Ayatollah Khomeini assume power. At least this was the position of the administration at the time who had struggled through the Iran-Contra affair that involved the illegal sale of arms to Iran in exchange for funds used to supply Nicaraguan contras.

In light of this knowledge *Joshan* represented a serious threat to US forces, however Less ordered SAG Charlie to warn of the Iranian vessel to enable the search and destruction of *Sabalan* or her sister ship *Sahand* to continue. Despite issuing four distinct warnings for the *Joshan* to turn away she closed on SAG Charlie, and when within thirteen nautical miles, Less gave permission for weapons free engagement, that is, to fire at will with any and all weapons available. Following a final warning, the commanding officer of *Joshan* responded with the launch of his Harpoon missile. Whether due to mechanical fault or failure in radar acquisition, the missile passed close by the USS *Wainright* before splashing into the sea.

In response *Wainright* and USS *Simpson* fired a total of five SM-1 Standard missiles at the *Joshan* all of which struck, whilst the USS *Bagley* fired a Harpoon that failed to acquire the blazing wreck and missed. The doomed vessel was then finished off with gunfire. In what has been assumed was an attempted coordinated air-surface strike an Iranian F-4 Phantom was detected approaching SAG Charlie and, it too, ignored warnings to turn away.16*Wainright* fired two SM-2 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), one of which hit the aircraft forcing it to abandon its attack and turn away. So ends the first missile exchange between surface combatants. It can be argued that the scale of the engagement does not provide a significant quantity of data to verify the effectiveness of weapons or tactics; however the focus here is on the historical importance of the action as precedence in naval warfare.

Later that afternoon at approximately 1500 hrs one of the primary naval targets was detected sortieing from Bandar Abas. Rules of engagement required a positive identification of the target before attacking, and whilst attempting this identification two A-6E Intruders and an F-14A Tomcat from *Enterprise* were fired upon from the vessel. In response the Intruders launched both missiles and bombs at what was identified as the *Sahand* which was hit multiple times. The USS *Strauss* of SAG Delta also fired a Harpoon missile*.* The resulting fires on board caused an explosion of the ship’s magazines, and by the end of the day she had sunk in what was one of the few blue water naval vessels to have been sunk in action since World War II.

During the course of this action the primary target of SAG Delta emerged from Bandar Abas and was positively identified as *Sabalan* by the same aircraft from *Enterprise* that dealt with the Iranian Boghammers earlier in the day. During the identification passes *Sabalan* also fired upon the Intruders, thus providing them with the authority to attack. A single 500 pound Mk-82 laser-guided bomb was dropped and seen to hit amidships, detonating deep within her hull. A further strike force launched from *Enterprise* requested permission to attack which went all the way to Washington, but again in a display of rapid communications in the field, it was decided against with the statement: ‘We’ve shed enough blood today.’17

**The Outcome**

This action brought about a close to *Operation Praying Mantis*. The culmination of a series of events that highlighted the risks imposed by relatively cheap, low technology weapons in the form of mines to high-tech, complex systems such as modern warships. Not only did it expose the risk to naval assets, but to greater concerns such as freedom of navigation in international waters and maintenance of trade routes, but also the potential impact of regional conflicts on international trade and security.

It is also worth considering the affect that events leading up to *Operation Praying Mantis* might have had, not only on its outcome, but also the future events in the region. Whilst it is only with the benefit of hindsight and the facts that such consideration can be applied, one might ask, “What if?” Would the entire late twentieth century history of the Gulf Region, and indeed the Middle East, have been different if the *Stark* was better prepared for attack? Would a successful defence against the Iraqi air-strike have created a sense of complacency that precluded the high state of damage control training on *Roberts*? Had the *Roberts* incident been more catastrophic would the US have decided on a more proportional course of action that might have resulted in a totally different conflict in the Gulf involving Iran and the US and its allies? Would the Gulf War(s) against Iraq have evolved as they did? Indeed, had Saddam Hussein paid more attention to the evident US intention to protect Kuwaiti interests, might his invasion of that country ever have occurred? These questions are not intended as pithy counters to fact, but are proffered to explore how the Middle East, and possibly world affairs, might be different now.

Regardless of imponderables, *Operation Praying Mantis* resulted in a decisive success for the United States. In the largest US naval surface action since WWII, forces deployed half a world away from home effectively combined to eliminate close to half of Iran’s naval assets in a display of robust inter-service cooperation. Naval, Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force units worked in an effective manner that saw all operational objectives achieved with minimal loss; just two Marine helicopter pilots lost in an apparent incident unrelated to direct action. We also see a link to the ‘New Maritime Strategy’ of the 1980s that espouses force projection and counterforce measures, and a cementing of the US role as policeman of the region; especially as *Praying Mantis* resulted in the extension of protection to non-US flagged vessels.

Operation Praying Mantis did not provide a true large scale test of US capability, and indeed, it might be argued that the result of the engagements were almost pre-ordained. However, the results are self-evident and whilst minor, the destruction of Iranian naval capacity can be said to have contributed to the end of the Iran/Iraq war. Lasting legacies are also evident in the incorporation of new technologies allowing faster, more effective real-time communications on a global scale; although critics argue that it might lead to loss of control at battle fronts and put it in the hands of distant administrators. Military forces world-wide are also left with the evidence of the effectiveness of low cost, low tech weapons and what influence they might have on military and political outcomes.

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