



**NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**

**SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER  
TRANSFORMATION**

**SACT's opening remarks at**

**10<sup>th</sup> Annual Sister Cities International Breakfast**

**Christopher Newport University**

**Newport News, 21 July 2017**

**Général d'armée aérienne Denis MERCIER**



## **NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**

### **SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER TRANSFORMATION**

Thank you Mr. David Yancey for your kind introduction. It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to be here and say a few words at today's Annual Sister Cities International Breakfast.

Let me start by congratulating Mrs Stodghill, President , Sister Cities Newport News and its Board of Directors, for organizing today's event, celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and part of a much bigger movement.

One based on a vision of this city and its local community as a global leader, pursuing the sharing of common values and learning from others through cultural, educational and economic exchanges.

Congressman Scott, Senator Mason,

Mayor Dr. McKinley and Members of the Newport News City Council,

Members of the Newport News Public School Board,

"Citizen Diplomats", members of the local community, students from here and from China,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is precisely what President Dwight D. Eisenhower had in mind when he proposed in 1956 a people-to-people citizen diplomacy initiative to "help build the road to an enduring peace".

President Eisenhower, who was the first NATO Supreme Allied Commander to serve in post-World War II Europe, understood the importance of partnerships, not only between countries and organizations, but equally

## NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION



### SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER TRANSFORMATION

importantly between communities of likeminded people as a strong basis for lasting friendships and as a founding legacy for enduring peace.

The “People-to-People” committees that were initiated after the 1956 White House Conference, flourished, expanded and transformed into the Sister Cities Program, first as part of the National League of Cities, and later in 1967, as a separate non-profit Sister Cities International corporation. It is under this umbrella that since 1982 the Sister Cities of Newport News has built relationships through three official Sister Cities, and two Friendship Cities programmes.

The Friendship Cities Program is a way to initiate relationships between municipal governments on a less formal basis than with an official sister city relationship.

However, “Friendship City” is also the Chinese term for “Sister City”, and Newport News has both, one Chinese Sister City (Taizhou) [*Taille Jo*], and one Chinese Friendship City (ZiYang) [*Tu Young*], so this clearly illustrates that the essence does not lie in the wording but in the underlying spirit of creating long lasting relationships to “promote peace through mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation – one individual, one community at a time”.

Indeed, 131 French cities are part of this global community, this vast international network of more than 2,300 communities in about 130 countries. One “Friendship City” relationship was initiated in 2015 here in Newport News with the city of Saint-Nazaire.

Sister or Friendship City relationships can start for a variety of reasons: similar demographics or town sizes, business connections, similar industries, comparable tourist attractions, the same appreciation of the arts, academic or university poles working together, the presence of a diaspora community, etc.

Saint-Nazaire is a major harbour on the right bank of the Loire estuary, on the French Atlantic coast. It too has a long tradition of fishing and

## **NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**



### **SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER TRANSFORMATION**

shipbuilding, but the common ground it shares with Newport News goes beyond those obvious similarities.

Both cities share an important chapter in the history of World War I.

On April 6<sup>th</sup> 1917 the United States officially entered the First World War, the American Expeditionary Forces were established in France in July of that same year and the first American troops engaged in combat operations in October 1917.

Had we held this breakfast four days earlier, it would have been exactly a hundred years ago, on July 17<sup>th</sup> 1917, that the United States Army established two ports of embarkation, one in New York, and the second one here in Newport News. The main connection for the convoys transporting the troops and cargo across the Atlantic was with the port of Saint-Nazaire, where a transit zone for disembarkation was established.

Here in Newport News five Embarkation Camps were put in place to house, equip and train troops prior to their deployment overseas. In Saint-Nazaire a similar infrastructure was set up to conduct, what we would call today, the “reception and onward movement” of troops, horses, equipment and supplies to the front lines by road and railroad.

By the end of the war, about 300,000 troops had transited through Saint-Nazaire and around 30,000 Americans cohabited daily with 35,000 “Nazariens”. The Americans were called the “Sammies”, and as the combat-ready troops disembarked from such famous ships as the “Havana”, “Saratoga” or “Seattle”, they also brought soap, chocolate, “chewing-gum” (a source of much amazement in France at that time), blond tobacco cigarettes and even “canned-food”. They also shared their love of jazz and blues music, basketball and baseball with the citizens of Saint-Nazaire.

Soldiers from over here travelled over there to help end the war and bring back peace and freedom to people they did not even know. But, they shared the same values, “determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples”. From these individual and community

## **NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**



### **SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER TRANSFORMATION**

exchanges, and thanks to the sacrifices of these thousands of young American volunteers, new friendships were created across the Atlantic.

But these new ties are also echoes and reminders of an even older relationship, the same universal and reciprocal aspirations that, many decades earlier, had inspired French Generals Lafayette and Rochambeau to join forces with George Washington's Continental Army in the American Revolutionary War. And in one of the many eerie connections we find throughout our shared history, Rochambeau upon his return to France, became the governor of Picardie, where more than a century later, the final major Allied offensive took place, precipitating the end of World War I, with many of those American troops who had embarked from Newport News and transitioned through Saint-Nazaire, joining their Allies on the battlefields of the Meuse-Argonne.

But Lafayette, Rochambeau and Washington would not have succeeded without the help of another Frenchman, Admiral De Grasse. His fleet drew away the British forces and blockaded the coast here at the entrance of the Chesapeake Bay until Lord Cornwallis surrendered in Yorktown, ensuring the independence of the United States of America. The French fleet had ensured the protection of the sea lines of communication. This made France the oldest Ally of the United States.

In the same way, the protection of the troop convoys across the Atlantic in 1917 led to the development of the Norfolk Naval Base that is also celebrating its centennial this year.

Later during the Second World War, when what was then known as the "Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation" was reactivated, the majority of the convoys that left Newport News and Baltimore headed towards the North African and Mediterranean theatres of operations, and once again the Norfolk Naval Base played a major role in the protection of the troop and cargo convoys across the Atlantic.

So it was entirely logical that after the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Supreme Allied Command Atlantic was established on the

## **NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**



### **SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER TRANSFORMATION**

Norfolk Naval Base, in 1953, entrusted with a similar mission : to defend and safeguard the passage across the Atlantic Ocean and to secure the transatlantic lines of communications.

The evolutions of our security environment led to its reorganization into today's Allied Command Transformation in 2003, with a different mission.

But the necessity to secure the sea lines of communications did not disappear: this year, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, American and Canadian troops are once again deployed in Europe in support of their Allies at the Eastern borders of NATO.

The transatlantic friendship that began during the Revolutionary War and was revived during two World Wars continues today through NATO.

Indeed, since the beginning of NATO in 1949, a strong transatlantic bond forms the foundation of the North Atlantic Treaty's mission: to promote stability and ensure the security of our nations and their inhabitants, founded on the key principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.

The NATO nations thereby reaffirmed their faith in the purposes of the Charter of the United Nations, and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and governments.

In the aftermath of the Second World War and during the period known as the Cold War, the preservation of peace and security was sought in a united effort through collective defence. This means that an attack on one nation would be considered an attack against the whole Alliance, leading to collective self-defence, including, if deemed necessary, the use of armed force. This principle was only invoked once in NATO's history, following the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

Today the principle of a robust collective defence posture to deter any potential opponent from attacking the Alliance still remains a bedrock for our security, and it is reinforced by the enhancement of a broad network of partnerships. Over the last decades, NATO has developed structured

## **NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**



### **SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER TRANSFORMATION**

partnerships with countries and organizations interested in pursuing political dialogue and practical cooperation.

These partnerships play a crucial role in the effort to help build stability and to mitigate the potential of future conflicts. Furthermore, the creation of a broad network of partners, nations, organizations, industries and academia is necessary because in this complex global security environment, no nation or organization can manage a crisis on its own.

Key to this network of partners is the ability to all work together. And this brings me to most important element of all partnerships, namely what I like to call our “human capital” or as I mentioned earlier referring to President Eisenhower, the “people-to-people diplomacy”. Whether we talk about communities, cities, countries, or international organizations, it is essential we identify and solve problems together as citizens.

This brings me back to what you are doing here in Newport News, with the people of Saint-Nazaire, but also with other communities in Japan, China and Germany. The creation of these ties echoes NATO’s goals with its own Partnerships programmes. On a voluntary basis they explore opportunities to share experiences and to create an atmosphere conducive to developing new initiatives, building trust and promoting exchanges.

Much like the Sister Cities Youth Ambassador Programme, or the student exchange programme that you are organizing here this summer in Newport News with Chinese students that are among us here today, or the group of young people who just returned from your German sister city of Greifswald; the Model NATO Challenge is a collaboration between NATO's Allied Command Transformation and the Norfolk NATO Festival Board.

It brings together high school students from across the Hampton Roads area to discuss a fictitious crisis affecting NATO. These “student ambassadors”, represent all 29 nations of the Alliance, as part of the significant Allied Command Transformation community outreach in collaboration with the Norfolk NATO Festival education programme. The winners of the Challenge receive scholarship payments towards their future education, similar in spirit

## **NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**



### **SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER TRANSFORMATION**

if not in size to the scholarships you offer local students for an international education.

Indeed, the 700 staff members and their families, from 29 NATO nations and 7 represented Partner nations, form an important international outreach within Hampton Roads local communities.

My Command, Allied Command Transformation, based just across the bay in Norfolk, is the only NATO headquarters on American soil. It serves as a strong symbol of the Transatlantic Bond that continues to play a crucial role for the preservation of peace and freedom, and is part of a long and shared heritage.

NATO has been a stabilizing force for peace and security for the past 68 years, it will continue doing so by reaching out through partnerships to promote mutual understanding and to explore new forms of collaboration.

For my Command, partnerships or common initiatives with local communities or governments are an important part of this outreach. This year's International Resilience Event in close cooperation with the City of Norfolk, and the Industry Engages NATO Symposium, co-organized and prepared by the Norfolk-NATO Festival and the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, are two examples of new initiatives intended to foster local ties that contribute to a broader goal of common understanding, exchange of experiences and sharing of knowledge.

In the same vein, I salute Newport News Sister Cities' efforts to reinforce existing friendships and create new relationships across your cultural, educational and economic exchange activities.

I offer my support together with the international community of my headquarters I represent here today, and I wish you success in exploring new opportunities, perhaps also by further expanding your local network across Hampton Roads, together with NATO, to combine similar initiatives or contributions.



**NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**

**SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER  
TRANSFORMATION**

\*\*\*Thank you\*\*\*