

Allies hone Sharp Spear

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HUNDREDS of Nato ships and aircraft begin major manoeuvres around the Scottish coast tomorrow in the biggest naval exercise to take place in Northern waters since the mid-1970s. The peak of the action will be the mass bombing of a UK frigate 150 miles off the North-west coast on Thursday for which a huge danger zone will operate to keep away merchant ships. It is thought to be the first time a Nato exercise has included live bombing.

Codenamed Sharp Spear, the exercise will involve 270 ships and submarines and 350 aircraft. It will last until a week on Thursday. Forces from 10 countries including the UK, the United States, Canada, West Germany, France, and Spain will take part. But the manoeuvres, although on a large scale, are generally thought to be less offensive than previous exercises in response to the thaw in East-West relations and the scaling down of Soviet military capability.

Sharp Spear's main objective is to improve the ability of Nato navies to operate in shallow seas off the coast and to protect merchant shipping. Some 34 merchant vessels have been chartered, at a cost of £1.2 million alone, to act as convoys.

Two aircraft carriers, the Ark Royal and a new Spanish vessel, the Principe de Asturias, will participate along with several ships with nuclear capability. Aircraft will fly from six Scottish bases at Kinloss, Machrihanish, Lossiemouth, Buchan, Leuchars, and Stornoway, and will include Nimrods, Tornados, Phantoms, Canberras, Buccaneers and Shackletons.

A large convoy will assemble off Loch Ewe, the naval base north of Ullapool in the north-west of Scotland, and head for Stavanger in Norway on Thursday. About 75 'casualties' will be brought ashore at Aberdeen at the end of the week in a medical link-up between the Army and Navy.

A Nato spokesman emphasised that there would be no low-flying overland, that most of the flying would be over the sea and there would be no amphibious landings in the exercise.

The frigate to be sacrificed will be subjected to an almighty hammering from aircraft and ships. The heavy fire will start when a Spanish frigate hits it with Harpoon missiles which will be followed by Exocets from three UK ships. HMS Birmingham, a Type-42 destroyer, will launch Sea Darts before Buccaneer aircraft send down television-guided missiles on to the stricken craft.

If the frigate is still afloat by then, the bombardment will continue with German Tornados dropping bombs down its funnel. Spanish and British Harriers and more Buccaneers will finish it off.

Sharp Spear began off the south-west coast of England late last week and will steadily move around the Scottish coast before finishing in the North Sea and Baltic. It is the first in the series of new exercises to be carried out every